



デットロック

英田サキ

小説家・脚本家

SHIKI AIDA PRESENTS

キョーゴ文庫



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デットロック

英田サキ

小説家デビュー作

SHAKAIDA PRESENTS

SHAKAIDA PRESENTS

キョウ文庫

Deadlock - Volume 01 Chapter 00-04

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Deadlock – Prologue + Chapter 1

Footsteps approached.

Yuto strained his ears as he lay in the darkness. Amid the footsteps, he could make out the sound of metal clinking against metal. His heart leaped with expectation — what if? — but he sternly told himself not to get his hopes up. How many times had those footsteps brought him disappointment these past two weeks?

“Yuto Lennix. Wake up.” A sharp voice rang out in the cramped cell of the detention centre. Yuto opened his eyes and stared at the blank wall.

“I told you to wake up!” commanded the deputy sheriff in an irritable voice. Yuto slowly raised himself from his bed and turned his face toward the figure beyond the metal bars.

“Get over here and hold your hands out.”

Yuto did as he was told, went up to the metal bars, and held out his hands through the space in the middle. The deputy sheriff handcuffed him and opened the metal grate.

“The bus is leaving in an hour. Get your physical done and get changed.”

“Where am I going?” Yuto asked quietly.

“Schelger Prison,” replied the deputy sheriff, business-like. Yuto sighed in relief. He had been worried out of his mind about being transferred to the wrong prison due to some error.

“Tough luck. You’ll have to live with it,” said the deputy sheriff, apparently misinterpreting Yuto’s sigh. It was no wonder. No criminal would be glad to find out they were being transferred to a notorious maximum-security prison. But for Yuto, Schelger Prison was the one and only place that would save him.

Chapter 1

“Hey, so how many times have you been locked up?” whispered the Caucasian

young man sitting beside him. The blond man who had boarded at San Jose looked no older than twenty. His anxious face still retained some boyish innocence, and he looked like a high-school student pale with car-sickness.

“First time,” Yuto Lennix replied. He glanced at the young man briefly before turning his face forward again. The front and back of the prisoner transport bus was divided with metal fences, and security guards stood on both ends with rifles, keeping watch on the prisoners within the vehicle.

“It’s my first time, too,” said the young man. “Talk about unlucky. I can’t believe I’m being thrown into *the* Schelger Prison, among all places! Isn’t that where—”

“You! No talking!” barked a voice behind him. The young man hastily shut his mouth.

A mood of dread enveloped the bus as it carried a load of about twenty prisoners in orange jump suits, heading straight north along the Interstate.

The bright April sunlight streamed in through the fenced windows, in stark contrast to the dark and clouded hearts of the prisoners. When would be the next time they would see the light of day? Yuto found himself growing sentimental as he narrowed his eyes and watched the scenery slip by.

After a while, the bus arrived at its destination. The Schelger State Prison, located in California, was even larger than what rumours said. An immense expanse of land lay before him, the acreage of which he could hardly begin to estimate, all surrounded by miles and miles of fencing. Around the top part of the fence was an obscene amount of spiralled barbed wire, which was probably charged with high-voltage electric current.

The bus stopped temporarily in front of the gates. The guards in the surveillance towers on each side of the gate stood with their fingers on the triggers of their rifles, ready to fire. This intimidating sight convinced Yuto once and for all that this very place was the most guarded maximum-security prison in the States, with a history of over a hundred years. Approximately two thousand and five hundred prisoners served their sentences here.

The gates opened and the bus lurched into motion once more. It trundled around the spacious grounds surrounded by wire. There were basketball courts

and squash courts, and prisoners in blue denim clothes could be seen loitering in large groups.

The bus stopped in front of a large building. The guard in front opened the cage. They were instructed to get off the bus one by one. A Caucasian guard with sharp eyes and a hooked nose greeted them outside the bus, barking at the lined-up prisoners like an army sergeant from Hell.

“Welcome to Schelger State Prison!” he shouted. “First off: here, the word of the prison guard is absolute. I don’t care what kind of important job you had out there, or how much of a badass gangster you were. Once you’re inside the walls, it doesn’t matter. Don’t think you can get away with any rebellious attitude while you’re here. Disobey orders or show suspicious behaviour, and most likely you will be shot. See that gun tower over there!”

The guard pointed to a surveillance tower in the middle of the grounds. A prison guard with a rifle was looking out.

“Let’s say a commotion happens on the grounds. A warning shot will be fired into the air. If you hear a gunshot, you are to get down and lie on your bellies. Any gunshots you hear after that will mean that someone has been shot. All of the guards in the gun towers here are expert shots who spend three hours each day shooting rounds. Keep that in mind!” the guard snapped menacingly, before commanding them to file inside the building. Yuto and the rest of the prisoners began to shuffle forward like pitiful cattle being herded in, their hands and feet in shackles. The prisoners watching from the other side of the metal fence began jeering at them.

“Hey, blondie! How’d you like to be my bitch? I’ll come visit you later!”

“You look like you’re asking for a good time!”

They were showered with one vulgar taunt after another as they walked past. A black man called out to Yuto.

“You! You yellow bitch, yeah, I’m talking to you.”

When Yuto glanced at him, the black man grinned and banged the wire fence. He wore a wool hat pulled down just above his eyes, with a silver earring on his right ear. He was heavysset and looked to be in his late twenties, with an

impressive physique like that of a professional football player.

“I’ve never fucked a yellow chick before. You’ll give me a taste, won’t ya? I can’t wait to tap that sweet ass,” the man said before sticking up his middle finger. Yuto gritted his teeth against the humiliation and averted his eyes from the black man. From now on, he would probably experience countless other instances of the same kind of taunting and insults. If he let his anger get to him every single time, he wouldn’t last.

Since there were no women in prison, young men with pretty faces were the first to get preyed on. Yuto was twenty-eight, but he knew that those of Asian backgrounds were often seen as younger. That was why he had purposely refused to shave since he was put into the detention centre. He didn’t know how effective his unruly facial hair would be, but he had to defend himself in any way he could against unnecessary troubles.

They were put through a physical check as soon as they entered the prison. The physical examination was thorough, and they were stripped naked and examined right down to their anuses. It would have been unbearable humiliation for Yuto if this had been before he was arrested. Either he had gotten used to it from the long days in detention, or his emotions had simply numbed, for he did not find it particularly distressing.

Yuto had become a prisoner from the moment he had been sentenced as guilty. Like a well-behaved dog, he opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out when he was told, and he bent over and opened his legs if he was told to show his ass. A prisoner was not entitled to the most basic of human dignities.

He changed into the prison uniform provided for him and was going through prison admittance procedures in a separate room when the door suddenly opened and a man came in. He was an older man wearing a three-piece suit. The officer in charge stood up in haste.

“Warden Corning. Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Just on patrol. It’s an important part of my job to know what’s going on in this place, after all.” Corning threw a glance at Yuto, who was also standing, before reaching for the documents on the desk.

“So, you worked for the DEA before you got arrested, is that right?”

Yuto did not answer him.

“This man is the prison warden! You answer him!” barked the guard in charge.

“...That’s right,” Yuto replied.

“Tell me about the work you did,” Corning pushed further.

“I was an investigator,” Yuto answered flatly. Corning furrowed his brow and shook his head.

“It’s a shame. A guy like you, persecuting crime on the front lines, ending up a criminal himself. I hear you’re in here for murdering one of your own. Can’t go much lower than that, can you?”

Yuto was careful not to look Corning in the eye. He did not want the man to sense the violent anger that was coiling in the depths of his heart.

Killer of his own kind – it was an insult that Yuto found hard to bear. Yuto, in fact, did not murder his colleague, Paul McLean. Paul was Yuto’s partner and best friend. Yuto could say with conviction that, apart from Paul’s family, no one had mourned more deeply over Paul’s death than him. That was how important Paul had been to him.

As DEA investigators, the two had disguised as drug dealers to infiltrate a drug-smuggling ring in New York. Over the course of one year, they penetrated deep into the organization and had finally succeeded in arresting the person at the top. But the glory was short-lived; two weeks later, Paul was stabbed to death in his house by an unidentified killer.

Paul was four years Yuto’s senior, and was a competent investigator. He was the calm and collected partner who stood solidly behind Yuto even in his occasional moments of reckless haste, never one to cower away and always one who could develop a highly sophisticated action plan. Yuto looked up to Paul more than anyone, as a fellow man and as an investigator.

He was a man with whom Yuto could entrust his life – then came his death. Yuto was crippled by shock when he received the news, but what awaited him was further tragedy.

For reasons unknown, Yuto’s fingerprints had been lifted from the murder

weapon, a kitchen knife left at the scene. The police arrested Yuto under suspicion of the murder of Paul McLean. The knife thrust before him by the detective during his interrogation was indeed Yuto's kitchen knife, which was supposed to be at his house. Yuto protested desperately that someone must have stolen it from his house when he wasn't home, but the police continued to accuse Yuto based on a witness statement they had gotten saying that Yuto and Paul were seen arguing at their local bar the night before the murder.

Occasionally, Yuto tended to butt heads with Paul over investigative tactics. It was true – that night as well, the two of them had gotten drunk and had an argument that was loud enough to draw the attention of those around them. But the argument had been none of the sort to leave either of them with a grudge. These rows were a common occurrence for them.

The police did not trust a single word of Yuto's side of the story. He had no alibi since he lived alone. The circumstances were much too disadvantageous for him. Yet Yuto stubbornly continued to deny the accusation, believing that a proper investigation would eventually uncover the truth.

However, the unbelievable occurred when his house was searched afterwards. Cocaine was found and seized – cocaine he had never possessed. The police jumped to the conclusion that Paul had discovered Yuto's cocaine use, which sparked their argument and led Yuto to murder Paul as a way to shut him up. Under that assumption, the police laid scathing criticism upon Yuto.

Someone must have sneaked into his apartment, taken the knife, and hidden the cocaine. There was no doubt about it. It was clearly a well thought-out and premeditated crime. Throughout the brutal questionings he was subjected to by the police, Yuto insisted that the drug-smuggling ring had likely murdered Paul and framed him as revenge for being unmasked. Even during the arraignment, Yuto continued to plead not guilty.

The murder of Paul McLean was taken to trial by jury, but the twelve members were ruthless in their decision. Yuto was pronounced guilty. The jury was made up of eight Caucasians, two African-Americans, and two Latin-Americans. Perhaps he would have been sentenced differently if he were Caucasian. For the first time in his life, Yuto cursed the fact that his skin was not white.

Racial discrimination was rampant in the courts. For example, if an African-American murdered a Caucasian, he was far more likely to be sentenced to death than if a Caucasian had murdered an African-American, or if an African-American had murdered another African-American. In America's court system, a Caucasian life was more precious than any other kind.

"But you lived in New York and got arrested there. Why were you transferred here?" Corning asked in perplexity. Currently, the state of California prohibited the transfer of inmates from other states. Yuto felt his heart jump, but maintained a veneer of indifference.

"My family lives in LA, so I requested to be placed in a prison nearby," he said quietly. "But all the prisons there were full, so I was transferred here." Corning dismissed his answer with a sniff and a nod. "They've got serious overcrowding in LA," he conceded.

Once the procedures were over and Yuto made to leave the room, Corning called him back.

"Lennix. Police are the enemy for inmates, but so is the DEA. Make sure you keep your previous work under wraps at all costs. I will not tolerate any disputes in my prison. In here, you're just a prisoner like the rest of them. Caged and fed, like cattle. Actually, you lot are even less than that because you can't be sent to the slaughterhouse to be eaten. Everyone in here is worth less than cattle. Something to think about when you go to bed at night."

His verbal abuse was unthinkable for a warden, a person of his position. Yuto was disgusted. If the guy at the top thought this way, then the prison guards below him probably followed suit.

After that, Yuto was given a medical check and an explanation of the rules of the prison. HE was given his photo ID card with his inmate number, and supplies such as blankets and toiletry items. Yuto's inmate number was 40375. Apparently he had to give this number and his name to the guard during the lock-up and roll calls that occurred five times daily.

"Yuto Lennix, Matthew Caine, follow me. Your cells are in Block A, west wing," commanded the young prison guard. The other name he had called, Matthew Caine, belonged to the boy who had spoken to him on the bus. Matthew,

apparently glad that they were together, gave Yuto a look of relief as he carried his things in his arms.

Matthew not only had a boyish face, but was also small in frame. From the looks of it, he weighed about 110 pounds. The top of his head came up to Yuto's eyes. Yuto was five feet and seven inches, which meant Matthew was probably shorter than that.

The guard told them he was in charge of Block A as he walked ahead of them, and quickly turned around to look at Matthew with a cryptic smile.

"Caine, you're an unlucky man. The west wing is full of violent criminals and long-term inmates. Normally someone with a two-year sentence would be sent to low-security in the east wing, but unfortunately it's full over there."

Matthew looked like a student who had been given a detention by his teacher. He looked at the guard with a restless mix of anxiety and dissatisfaction.

"But I'll be transferred to the east wing if there's a vacancy, right?"

The guard was noncommittal, saying it depended on the timing.

"No way," Matthew murmured weakly. Yuto felt sorry for Matthew's plight. There was no way the lust-hungry inmates would leave such a boyish newcomer alone.

Yuto himself was also in a similar situation, but he had pride in himself for the five years he had worked as a narcotic investigator. The majority of his missions were sting operations and undercover missions, which were the most dangerous. He had concealed his identity to slip into criminal organizations and face off with violent drug dealers. Thanks to his experience and his self-assurance, even in this situation he managed to keep his cool without giving in to the weight of anxiety and despair. But Yuto was also well aware of the fact that his former work, although for him an emotional crutch, was also baggage which would provoke unneeded hatred toward him in prison.

Block A was located in the farthest end of the west wing. Yuto stepped through the unlocked gates and was overwhelmed at the sight which spread before his eyes.

The left side of the gigantic atrium-like space was occupied by sterile floor-to-

ceiling metal cages. The endless line of cells extended to the back of the wing and rose four storeys high. In front of the cells on each floor was a steel-grate passage surrounded by fences that came up to the waist. Several inmates rested their arms on the fences, eyeing the newcomers, Yuto and Matthew, with eager curiosity.

On the opposite wall were surveillance passages that looked like balconies, called gun rails. The passages were small, about three feet in width, and were situated at the same height as the second and fourth storeys. From there, the guards could observe the cells across.

“Caine, you’re in that cell on the first floor.”

Matthew cautiously approached the cell that the guard had pointed out.

“Howes, you’ve got a newcomer. Take care of him, will you?”

An elderly black man sitting on his bed took one look at Matthew and threw up his hands exaggeratedly.

“Oh, Lord, Guthrie! Are you kidding me? That’s a white boy!”

The guard laughed, saying it was no joke. He shoved Matthew from behind into the cell.

“The geezer and the kid. You’ll make a good pair. Cause any trouble and you two’ll be sent into solitary together. Lennix, you’re on the third floor.”

As the guard climbed the stairs, Yuto posed a modest question as he followed behind.

“Aren’t the cells separated by race?” Segregation was illegal, regardless of the place. The Supreme Court prohibited the separation of prisoners by race in state prisons. But it was hard to believe that prisons actually complied to this rule. Interracial conflicts were a significant issue. Just in the previous year, a conflict between blacks and Latinos in one Los Angeles prison had escalated into a riot involving two thousand people.

“There are no restrictions in common facilities. As for cells, we have whites in Block B, Latinos in Block C, and blacks in Block D. Overflow prisoners and those of other races are put into Block A, here.”

Yuto was slightly relieved to hear that. If these prisoners were safe enough to be put into mixed-race cells, it probably meant they weren't radical racists or excessively violent.

"You Chinese?" asked the guard.

"No. Japanese-American," Yuto replied.

"Japanese, huh. Don't see much of that here. Your cellmate is Dick Burnford. White. Not someone you'd trust, but you can rest assured he's not racist." The guard walked halfway down the passage before peering into the dimly-lit cell.

"Looks like the man's not in. You can use the top bunk. Your things go into that cabinet there. You can ask Burnford about the rest."

Once the guard was gone, Yuto put his things on the bed and took a sweeping glance around the room. On the right side of the cell was the bunk bed, and at the back was a toilet with a simple plastic curtain and a small sink. Above the sink were two small wooden cabinets.

The stained, unhygienic mattress was thin and hard. The grey walls were darkened with years of dirt which made it impossible to guess what colour they had been originally. The barred windows were so small, they barely let in any of the midday sunlight.

But what wearied Yuto the most was the size of this space. From the lack thereof, one would guess it had been a single occupancy cell before. He felt suffocated already just from the idea that he would be forced to live every single day in the presence of a man he didn't even know. Yuto gave a great sigh in his dark cell.

"Hey, can I come in?" Yuto turned around to see Matthew standing at the entrance, wearing an awkward smile. "Let's get to know each other. I'm Matthew Caine. You're Yuto, right?" he said with a shy smile.

Yuto inwardly sighed again. He could understand that the boy felt lonely at his first stint in prison, but when he thought about what lay ahead, he preferred that the boy not get too attached to him. Yuto had enough on his plate with his own matters, and that didn't include taking care of his newcomer friend.

Matthew didn't seem to sense Yuto's dismay as he came into the cell and sat

down on the bottom bunk.

“Matthew, don’t sit there,” Yuto warned.

“Why not?” Matthew asked in innocent surprise.

“That’s not my bed.”

Matthew stood up looking baffled.

“What happens if my cellmate comes back and sees some newcomer sitting on his bed?” Yuto explained. “Neither you or I have any idea if this guy is lenient enough to let you off.”

Matthew hunched his shoulders. “You worry too much,” he said. “If he’s offended, I’ll just apologize.”

Although it was none of his business, Yuto began to feel seriously concerned for Matthew. This boy was not only easily frightened, he was also imperceptive and slow to get the hint. He would probably not survive long here, in this prison rampant with aggressive inmates.

“Anyway, enough of that. Did you see this guidebook?” Matthew said incredulously as he reached for the booklet on the bed. The guide, given to them earlier, explained in detail the rules of prison and punishments for engaging in prohibited acts.

“Under prohibited actions, it says murder. Can you believe they actually have to write that out? That’s so funny.”

“That probably goes to show how much violence actually occurs.”

“Oh, come on. Even with this much surveillance?” Matthew said, wide-eyed. Yuto had just thrown him a pitying glance when they heard a voice from the passage.

“Twenty-three people.”

Yuto whirled around to see a young man standing at the entrance of the cell.

“Hey, fellas. Welcome to Block A, west wing. I’m Michele Ronini. I live at the very end of this floor. You can call me Micky. Nice to meet you,” he said, holding his right hand out.

Yuto gave his own name and they exchanged a short handshake. Matthew seemed to warm up to Micky's friendly manner. An open and unreserved smile spread across his face.

"Nice to meet you also," he said as he firmly returned Micky's handshake.

Micky was a cheerful man with a pointed nose and pronounced features – Italian looks, as his name would indicate. The tips of his naturally-curly dark brown hair stuck up in all directions. He seemed to be about the same age as Yuto himself.

"I'm Matthew Caine. You can call me Matthew," the boy said. "So, what did you mean by twenty-three people?" he asked. Micky leaned against the wall and gave a casual answer.

"The number of prisoners killed here last year. A rough calculation puts it at about two people per month. Injuries, on the other hand, from fights and all that – happens every day."

Matthew's face tensed. Micky clapped him lightheartedly on the shoulder.

"Don't worry," he added jovially, "you're more likely to get into a car accident outside."

Continued in [Chapter 2](#).

Deadlock – Chapter 2

Continued from [Chapter 1](#).

Micky invited the two of them to the cafeteria since it was almost five o'clock. All of the prisoners gathered in one place, which meant if you didn't get there early, you were forced to wait in a wearisome long line. Once they reached the first floor, Micky called out to a man in the crowd.

"Hey, Nathan. Good timing. Let me introduce you to these guys. Yuto Lennix and Matthew Caine. They're in Block A starting today. This here is my roommate, Nathan."

"Nathan Clark. Pleased to meet you." Nathan smiled warmly, holding a few books in the crook of one arm and holding out the other hand for a handshake. He was around thirty, with straight, shiny chestnut hair that drew the eye. He was tall and thin, but his broad shoulders kept him from looking scrawny. His narrow nose and thin lips made him look intelligent but also somewhat high-strung. Yet his gentle smile and natural, relaxed manner took the edge off that impression, leaving him with one of dignified acceptance.

"Come to the cafeteria with us," Micky said.

"Sure. Give me a minute while I put these books away," Nathan answered serenely, and slowly ascended the stairs. In some peculiar way, he seemed not of this world.

While they waited, Micky launched into his life story at no one's request. He had botched a bank robbery, gotten arrested, and had been here for five years now. He proudly informed them that he smuggled in prohibited items through a unique route that passed under the guard's radar, and made a business of selling his wares to a broad clientele.

"If you need anything, just let me know. Porno mags, drugs, knives, you name it. I can get you anything except ladies."

Yuto inwardly gave a wry smile. So that was what this was about. He had been

wondering why Micky was so friendly, but now he knew that for Micky, newcomers meant new customers.

Nathan returned shortly, and the group of four exited Block A and headed toward the cafeteria. Micky whistled to himself as he ambled on ahead. Nathan in the rear proceeded to fill in Yuto and Matthew, who were still clueless, on various things about the prison.

The building was divided broadly into four wings encompassing the grounds: the central wing, west wing, east wing, and north wing. The east and west wings consisted of cells; the north wing had a gymnasium and work factory; the central wing, the only one to have a protrusion to make it a T-shape, had the warden's office, administration office, and the guards' station, as well as the control centre – all part of the management wing in the bottom section of the "T" that formed the main core of the prison. At the back of the "T" were the cafeteria, recreation room, infirmary, library, and educational facilities.

Security checks were conducted by the guards at certain major gates. Some locations were equipped with metal detectors.

"Countless ways to get around those, of course," Nathan added, flashing a sly smile. His explanations were to-the-point and concise. Even a short conversation was enough to show that he was an intelligent man.

They were frisked at the cafeteria entrance. Yuto could see what Nathan meant as the guard gave him a halfhearted pat-down. With body checks like these, he wouldn't have much trouble sneaking in a small blade or two – in his shoes, under the collar of his shirt, behind his belt. There were plenty of places to hide one if he felt the need to.

In the kitchen, inmates donning white aprons worked busily under the scrutinizing eye of the guards. Micky and Nathan, followed by Yuto and Matthew, picked up plastic trays and joined a line that was already getting quite long as they waited for their supper to be dished out.

The meal consisted of a few items such as fried fish and chicken, cheese grits in paper cups, and salad. Bread was free to take, as well as orange juice and coffee.

The spacious cafeteria buzzed with the chatter of swarms of inmates. The air was thick with the body odour of men, which mingled with the smell of food to

make for a peculiar mix.

A closer look showed that the tables in parts of the room were actually dominated by certain groups: whites to the right, the blacks at the back, and the Latinos on the left side. Yuto wondered if certain races had to sit at certain tables, but Micky and Nathan proceeded to take their seats at the same table as Yuto and Matthew near the middle of the room. Even beside him, inmates of differing skin colour were eating together. Apparently the middle of the room was a mixed-race zone.

The meal was abysmal to say the least, although he hadn't expected much. But appetite didn't matter; once it was in his stomach, the food would be metabolized into energy. Yuto silently forked the food into his mouth with his plastic utensils, his body a machine, the food more like fuel.

Occasionally a passing inmate looked at Matthew and blew a wolf-whistle, as if to catcall at a pretty girl.

"Heya, Marshmallow Caine," said Micky, snapping his fingers and pointing at Matthew in an exaggerated impression.

"It's Matthew," the boy promptly corrected.

"Listen, when you're finished eating, Marshmallow Boy, you need to go to the canteen and buy the latest chastity belt. Developed by NASA especially for prisoners. You can take a shit without taking it off. Neat, huh?"

Micky banged the table as he laughed at his own joke, throwing a backward glance at Matthew, who was sitting there looking taken aback.

"But even with a chastity belt, I bet you won't even last three days. I'll bet three packs of cigarettes."

Matthew grimaced, but Nathan's face was grave as he agreed, saying that Micky was not exaggerating.

"You should really be careful. The number of homicides doesn't even compare to the number of rapes that occur in prison. Try not to act alone. Stay away from shady places. Be especially careful around the gangs. If you get attacked by them, don't try to retaliate. Let them have your way with you, and at least you'll get out alive."

“Get out of what alive, Mr. Lawyer?”

Nathan knitted his brow. Yuto was simultaneously put on guard as he felt a hand grab his shoulder.

“We havin’ fun here? Care to let me join the welcome party?” The hand on Yuto’s shoulder belonged to a black man with a towering frame. He was wearing a wool hat and a silver earring on his right ear. It was, without a doubt, the man who had spoken to him on the grounds. He had a gaggle of rough-looking black men behind him.

“Ain’t you gonna introduce this pretty face to me? I’ve been wanting to get to know him since I saw him on the grounds. What’s your name? I’m Bob Trenkler. Everyone calls me BB,” the man said, bringing his face close to Yuto’s. Yuto looked the other way. Another black man tried to peer at his face from the other side.

“Hey, BB. Forget this one. The white boy’s cuter.”

“Bullshit. What’re you gonna get out of a kid who looks like he hasn’t even hit puberty? Learn how to pick your hos.”

BB leaned over and brought his nose to Yuto’s neck. He inhaled deeply with a look of ecstasy on his face, as if he were smelling a feast. “Ah, you smell like one fine bitch,” he whispered lewdly at his ear. Yuto snapped.

“Don’t touch me with your filthy hands,” he spat as he brushed BB’s hand away. The crowd buzzed with agitation.

“You think you can talk like that to BB just ‘cause you’re new, you shit?”

“You asking to get killed?”

BB’s boys instantly rose in anger as they surrounded Yuto. Onlookers hoping to catch a fight egged them on.

“Do it!”

“Get him!”

“...Move out of the way,” a voice said to the menacing group of black men. All eyes were directed to the owner of the voice. “Let me through. I’d like to eat,” the white man said quietly, holding a tray. He had a balanced, muscular build,

with a proportionate face that was nothing short of beautiful. Yuto found his eyes fixed on the man.

The man, who had his longish blond hair tied casually at the back, did not appear to so much as mind the tense atmosphere around him. He slipped past the black men and their aggressive stares, and sat down beside Yuto.

“Trenkler! What’re you doing over there? If you’re finished eating, get the hell out!” yelled the guard from a distance, noticing the commotion.

“I got it, I got it. I was only saying hi to the newcomer,” BB said easily to the guard. With a sly smile on his face, he gave Yuto a lingering stare. “I like feisty bitches. Let’s go on a date sometime, pretty face. I’ll show you a good time. —Hey, Burnford. Don’t think you can strut around ‘cause Choker’s got your back.”

BB hurled a glare at the man who had interrupted him, and left with his cronies. The gallery of men around them, who had been watching with bated breath, let out a collective sigh somewhere between relief and disappointment.

“Good job attracting the attention of the worst possible guy ever,” babbled Micky. “That guy’s Bad Bob, and he’s the leader of the Black Soldiers. He let loose with a machine gun and killed four people. Got sentenced to a hundred and fifty years in prison. Dangerous guy, that one.”

“Black Soldiers? That’s kind of lame-sounding, isn’t it?” said Yuto derisively. Micky scowled and shook his head.

“It’s nothing to laugh about, man. The gangs run this place. The three big ones with the most power are the Black Soldiers, the chicano group Locos Hermanos, and the gang of whites, ABL. Just take my word for it, Yuto. If you want to get out of here alive, don’t start anything with them.”

“Alright, Micky, I get it. I suppose I’ll head over to the canteen and get me one of those NASA-made chastity belts, too,” Yuto said, in a joke that wasn’t quite a joke anymore.

“It’d be a good idea,” Micky said with a shrug.

“Dick,” Nathan said, “he’s your new roommate.” The man, who had been silently focused on his meal, turned to look expressionlessly at Yuto. When Yuto

introduced himself, the man did the same.

“Dick Burnford,” he replied shortly, then went back to eating. Yuto discreetly observed his unsociable roommate. Dick Burnford, to sum up in one word, was handsome.

His masculine features were neatly defined and proportionate. He was a good-looking man in anyone’s eyes. His tall figure was well-balanced and toned to perfection. His only flaw was a prominent scar that ran from his forehead to the outer edge of his eyebrow, but in prison, a scar on his face probably added a nice touch.

But what drew Yuto’s eye more than his refined looks or damaging scar were Dick’s striking blue eyes, reminiscent of a clear lake. They were neither blue-grey nor blue-green, but blue in the truest sense of the word.

Blond hair and blue eyes. It was not a rare combination, but Caucasians born with blue eyes tended to see them darken with age, like their blond hair. In that sense, it was rare to see someone who had retained both features to such a perfect degree.

“How old are you, Dick?” Yuto asked, hoping his question would become a hook for further conversation. He preferred to get a grasp early on of the person with whom he was going to be sleeping and waking in the same cell.

“Twenty-nine,” he replied promptly, without even looking at Yuto.

“That makes us one year apart. I’m twenty-eight. When did you come here?” Yuto kept his tone casual, but Dick seemed utterly unwilling to pursue the conversation. In short, he seemed difficult to get along with.

“Matthew, how old’re you?” Micky butted in brightly, as if to mediate the situation. Matthew answered that he was almost twenty-one. “You look like you’d still be crying for Mommy, baby face,” Micky remarked. “What got you thrown in here?”

Matthew pushed his grits around with his fork. “It’s no big deal,” he mumbled. “My buddy and I shoplifted some whisky from a liquor shop run by this old guy. My friend said the man was senile, and we’d have nothing to worry about. But we ended up getting caught and we got into a fight. I ended up stabbing the guy

with my friend's knife... it was in the arm, but the guy fell over from the shock and hit his head. Critical condition with a brain contusion. I got two years."

"You were unlucky, man," Micky said, patting Matthew on the shoulder. A case of shoplifting had morphed instantly into accessory to aggravated theft and assault. Not to mention being sent to the west wing, earning him even the pity of the guard. Matthew was quite out of luck.

"How many years're you in for, Yuto?"

"Fifteen."

Micky whistled and leaned forward eagerly. "So what'd you do?"

"I didn't do anything."

Micky and Nathan looked at each other, Yuto didn't care what that made people think of him. There was no other way to describe it.

"I'm innocent," Yuto declared firmly.

"Ah, well," Micky said awkwardly, scratching his cheek. "It happens. You must've been unlucky, too."

Perhaps Micky thought he was funny in the head, but Yuto didn't care. His side of the story had been rejected from the onset in interrogations and at court. He had been framed for murdering his fellow investigator and had been sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Compared to the bitterness of that, the idea of a fellow inmate thinking he'd lost his marbles didn't hurt one bit.

"Hey," Matthew spoke up to Nathan as if to clear the awkward air. "You know how that black guy back there called you Mr. Lawyer? Were you one before you came here?"

"Nathan volunteers at the law library," Micky answered for him, apparently unable to resist having a say in everything. "This guy here knows a lot – and I mean a lot – about law. He's submitted written complaints on behalf of inmates to the State Department of Corrections. Human rights violations, unfair treatment, all that. He's counselled inmates with long sentences and cross-referenced laws and precedents to write up and submit petitions to get their sentences shortened. He's amazing. Just the other day, he found a loophole in

the law and filed a claim for an inmate, and the guy got his sentence shortened by ten years. Other guys have gotten out on parole. You can depend on this guy a lot more than lawyers outside. Nathan even has the privilege to talk directly with Warden Corning.”

Micky’s tone of admiration made it clear that he respected his roommate. For a number of inmates here, Nathan was probably like the Saviour.

“I only get called out by the Warden when he wants to lecture me,” Nathan said. “I give him a headache because I go around causing unnecessary trouble.”

“Where did you study law?” Yuto asked.

“I studied a bit of it in college,” said Nathan with a smile. “My specialization was criminal law. Now I get to study criminals first-hand,” he mused. There was no self-pity in the way Nathan joked about his situation. Yuto felt a strong liking toward him. Nathan was not just a man of brains.

Dick, on the other hand, was unfathomable from their brief interaction. He was a man of few words, and hardly initiated any conversation. But that didn’t mean he rejected communication outright; he still smiled at Micky’s stupid jokes and responded to Nathan’s small talk. He wasn’t the social type, but still showed an acceptable level of politeness to his friends. That was Yuto’s impression so far.

Whatever the case, Dick made an infinitely better roommate than a rambunctious man like Micky.

After dinner, Yuto’s group returned to Block A for their lock-up and roll call at six o’clock. All of the inmates walked to their cells *en masse* like an exodus.

Suddenly, an angry voice rose from the moving swarm. Onlookers quickly gathered around what appeared to be a fight. Loud, enthusiastic insults were hurled in the air.

Matthew tried to make his way toward the commotion, but was stopped by Nathan. “Don’t,” he warned. “Don’t get involved. If you’re late for roll call, you’ll have a strict punishment to answer to later.”

“Fights happen all the time. Soon you won’t find them new at all. Let’s go,” Micky said, pushing Matthew’s shoulders. The boy gave a listless sigh.

“Everyone’s irritable because they’re not getting enough calcium,” Nathan said mildly. As the group started walking again, Yuto tried to follow. He had taken only a few steps forward when he was yanked by the arm from behind. When Yuto realized the danger he was in, it was too late. A group of men had already dragged him into a nearby washroom. They were BB’s cronies who had threatened him in the cafeteria.

“Fuck him up!” yelled the man who was pinioning him. The three other men lunged. One threw a heavy blow to his stomach; another took a swing to the back of his head. When Yuto crumpled to the floor from the pain and shock, he was kicked fiercely while he was still down.

Yuto knew he could put up a decent fight if he wanted to, but four against one was too much of a disadvantage. Instead, he curled up to protect his organs, brought up his arms to protect his head, and dedicated himself solely to defence as he waited for the storm to pass.

“Next time you decide to mouth off to BB, remember it won’t be this gentle next time. Alright guys, let’s go.”

Once they made a quick job of beating up Yuto, the black men turned swiftly and ran off. Nathan and Micky appeared immediately afterwards. When they saw Yuto on the floor, they hurried over to him.

“Yuto, hang in there. Are you alright?”

“Damn it, it’s those bastards from the Black Soldiers!” muttered Micky, his voice dripping with hatred. Nathan ordered him to bring Dick. The man came bursting into the room just as Nathan was supporting Yuto in his arms, helping him to sit up. Dick stared into Yuto’s eyes.

“Can you see my face?”

“...Yeah. Two eyes, one nose, one mouth. Hello, handsome.”

“If you’re well enough to joke, we’ve got nothing to worry about. Let’s take him to our cell.”

Yuto managed to stand up with the support of Nathan and Micky. His chest felt racked with pain whenever he inhaled, no doubt because of the ruthless kicks he had been subjected to.

“Walk. It’ll be solitary for you if they find out you’ve been fighting. Meanwhile, I’ll thank my lucky stars we’ve got a troublemaker from day one.” Dick’s snide tone struck a nerve.

“I haven’t done anything,” Yuto shot back with a grimace.

“Micky was nice enough to warn you back there, and you laughed him off. You brought this upon yourself,” Dick said icily. Yuto felt his face stiffen.

“I’ll let you know right now that you’re not going get off scotch-free because you’re the victim. For the guards, the commotion itself is the problem.”

“So you’re saying if someone gets lynched, he’ll get punished for it, too? That’s messed up,” Yuto said irritably as Dick peered outside the washroom. Dick did not even turn around.

“I don’t care if you think it’s messed up. This is where you’ll be living from now on. —Alright, let’s head out.” At Dick’s signal, Nathan and Micky began to walk, half-carrying Yuto. Yuto felt his body scream in agony at each step. But no way in hell was he going to say he couldn’t walk. His manly pride was already hurt considerably from the shame of being subjected to a beating without even a chance to retaliate.

“Where’s Matthew?” Yuto asked Micky, noticing that the boy was nowhere to be found.

“Nathan and I were wondering where you’d disappeared off to when we saw the guys from the Black Soldiers running out of the washrooms,” Micky answered. “We had an idea of what might have happened, so we made him go back by himself. We don’t want to involve a little boy with a short sentence, do we?”

“You’re right.” Yuto smiled through the pain, feeling a little redeemed by Micky’s kindness.

“Nathan, what’s wrong with the newcomer?” demanded the guard standing at the entrance of Block A, his voice suspicious. It was Guthrie, the guard who had brought Yuto and Matthew here.

“He got knocked over and fell down. It was crowded, so he was trampled pretty badly,” Nathan said calmly. Guthrie seemed convinced; he jerked his chin

as if to tell them to hurry along. Micky sighed in relief beside him.

Yuto desperately willed his aching body to move up the flights of stairs until the third floor. Nathan and Micky sat Yuto down on Dick's bed before hurrying off to their cell. A few minutes later, an ear-splitting bell rang out across Block A.

"Step back!" the guard's roar echoed throughout the building.

"After you hear this sound, the doors close automatically," Dick said. True to his words, the doors slid rapidly over the rails, closing the cell off. Yuto was now thoroughly aware that he had become a real prisoner inside this cramped cage.

Once the guard was finishing doing roll call, the doors opened again. Yuto was ordered by Dick to lie down on the bed. As he gingerly stretched out, Dick peered into his eyes again, then ran his cold hands over Yuto's body to check the severity of his injuries, asking if he had a headache or felt any nausea.

"Dick. How's Yuto doing?" Nathan and Micky were back to visit.

"I'm checking him out right now. —You were saying your chest hurts when you breathe in?"

When Yuto nodded, Dick turned to Nathan and Micky. "He might've fractured a rib."

"What should we do?" asked Nathan. Dick shrugged as if to say it was none of his business, and got to his feet.

"We can only wait until it heals itself. I'm heading to the infirmary. I still have work left to do. Choker's not doing very well."

Once Dick had left the cell, Yuto asked Nathan a question. "Is Dick a doctor?" Nathan shook his head as he applied a wet towel to Yuto's swollen face.

"But he does have quite a lot of knowledge. He's a nursing assistant at the infirmary. He's used to taking care of injured people. Yuto, if it gets unbearable, you should tell the guard. Your application won't be received until tomorrow, though, so you'll have to do without the infirmary tonight."

Yuto thanked Nathan for his help, but told him he would not file an application. Even if he were to see a doctor, treatment for a cracked rib would most likely only come in the form of a corset at most.

“Yuto, what happened?” Matthew cried as he barrelled into the cell. He stared wide-eyed at Yuto’s unsightly swollen face. “It looks horrible,” he said, his eyebrows knitted. “Was it those black guys who were bothering you at the cafeteria?”

“Yeah,” Micky answered. “But he was lucky that it happened before lock-up and roll call. They didn’t have much time to do damage.” Matthew listened to Micky’s explanation, then looked over at Yuto and bit his lip in anger.

“They went this far over that little comment? They’re insane.”

Yuto asked if he could be left alone so he could rest. Once the three men left his cell, he was once again forced to cope with the waves of endless, excruciating pain that attacked him. It coursed not only through his chest but through his entire body. Every part seemed to throb in pain. A pitiful whimper threatened to escape his lips even when he was staying still. Yuto gritted his teeth and endured.

This certainly wasn’t his first time being involved in violence; he had grappled with an armed man who had seen through his disguise during a sting operation. He had been stabbed by a fellow dealer when he was undercover. His job at the DEA had always come with some sort of danger.

But this was the first time he had been subjected to a one-sided beating, without even being able to receive treatment for the injuries he had sustained. It was a blow to his dignity to be lying here alone in bed in a dark and cramped cell with no other choice but to swallow his pain. But he was not about to let this bring him down.

Yuto gave himself a mental pep talk. *Don’t let this get to you. You’re a former DEA investigator. You’ve always braved every dangerous mission, fearing nothing. You’ve overcome countless difficulties.*

Right now, pride was the only strength left to Yuto. He had lost everything, but no one could take away his dignity – his belief in himself. He wasn’t about to let self-doubt creep up on him now.

He feared that once he began doubting himself, he would eventually lose faith in his own abilities completely. That was what he was most afraid of. The last kind of person he wanted to become was the kind of coward who was only

concerned weaselling his way out of every problem.

Yuto inwardly swore, aiming a figurative kick at his depressed self. He had seen all of this coming when he first came here. No one had forced him to come here. He had made the decision himself.

Yuto had chosen to come to Schelger State Prison at his own will. It was true that he had a family in LA, but there was another reason for why he had flown across the country all the way from the East coast to this far-flung prison on the West coast. The gravity of it could tip the scales of Yuto's precarious life. Or perhaps Yuto had already fallen off the precipice. He had lost everything because of that incident — his job, his social status, the trust of his friends. No matter how hard he struggled, he would never get those back. But Yuto had been given a single small nugget of hope in the darkest and deepest point of his life. That hope resided here, in Schelger Prison.

When Yuto was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for the murder of Paul McLean, he was struck down so far, so deep, he was past the point of recovery. That was when a certain organization had quietly extended communication to Yuto: the FBI, or the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Hey, Lennix. How's it going?" Heiden had flashed his ID card to Yuto in the meeting room of the detention centre and introduced himself as an investigator of the Domestic Terrorism section of the FBI Counter-terrorism Division. He was a pretty face in an expensive suit. Yuto found it difficult to like him, with his elitist, haughty, and condescending attitude so typical of the FBI.

Yuto had been confused at first, wondering what the FBI could want with him. But when he heard the words come out of Heiden's mouth, his confusion turned to astonishment.

"We want you to find a certain man in prison. If you find him, we'll promise you immediate release on parole." The sudden story was all too suspicious. Yuto was reluctant to believe the FBI's claims at first. Heiden flashed a cocky grin at his apprehensive face before he launched into an explanation.

"You're aware that over the past year there's been a series of small-scale acts of terrorism occurring in various places throughout the States, thought to be the doing of a single group?"

“I’ve heard it on the news,” Yuto answered. The cases, nicknamed The Silent Terror, had been causing ripples in society. There had been no declarations so far from the perpetrators, and no identifiable pattern in the locations where explosives had been planted. Even among experts, speculative opinion abounded over whether the perpetrators were a fundamentalist terrorist organization, an extremist far-right force, or were simply criminals who committed acts of terror for fun.

“The FBI is currently investigating this series of incidents, and two months ago, we arrested a Caucasian man in a supermarket in Connecticut who was in possession of explosives. He was thought to be involved in these incidents, and from his testimony we’ve found that he belonged to a radical cult group. But he refused a plea bargain, and he’d clammed up about everything else. The entirety of the organization is still unknown to us.”

Once Heiden realized that the man was petrified of a backlash from the organization, he had persistently reassured the man that he would be put into a witness protection program and that his safety would be guaranteed. The man, moved by Heiden’s earnestness, had finally agreed to break his silence.

“To summarize, this is what he told us. The organization wields an enormous power. Those who betray the organization are killed. All acts of terrorism are decided by one person, the leader. The past terror incidents were only games – in the future, something will occur on a larger scale. Vague things like that. We couldn’t get much from him on the leader in question, either. The FBI decided to transfer the man to our headquarters in Washington, where he would undergo a more comprehensive investigation. But that never happened.”

“Why not?” Yuto asked. Heiden had shrugged in mock defeat.

“He died. The man was sniped as soon as he stepped out of the detention centre. He died on the spot. A rifle was found on the roof of the adjacent building, presumably the murder weapon. But the sniper slipped through the cracks of the police’s emergency deployment and was never found.”

Yuto felt something strongly off about the cult organization’s ability to act so boldly and ruthlessly. A mysterious cult that committed repeated acts of terror – without a doubt they were incredibly dangerous, but it was not normal to kill off

their own member to prevent him from talking.

“Are they really just an insane cult? What about the likelihood of a bigger criminal organization being behind them?”

“We considered that, but there’s not enough information about the organization itself. At this stage, there’s nothing we can say. But the man was conscious for a while after being taken to the hospital, and he told us something very interesting. —The ringleader’s name is Corvus. Obviously a nickname. What this man told us was that Corvus is secretly directing members’ actions from inside a certain prison. Corvus is apparently a Caucasian male, about thirty years old, and a murderer. In the past he’s undergone comprehensive military training. He has a large burn scar on his back.”

Heiden drummed his fingers on the table.

“I see,” Yuto murmured, absently looking at the man’s neatly trimmed nails. “And you’re telling me to find him.”

“Exactly. Corvus is apparently serving at Schelger State Prison in California.”

Yuto was finally convinced that the FBI was serious about striking a deal with him. The target was a highly dangerous individual who had allegedly directed acts of terrorism on several occasions; if he was highly likely to cause more terrorism in the future, it was understandable that the FBI would resort to underground methods to capture him.

“There’s an international conference scheduled to take place in New York this autumn. Several important people from a number of countries will be participating. If they were to plan a terrorist attack during this time, you could imagine the shit fest it would be. The FBI is taking this very seriously. We’ve dispatched investigators into Schelger Prison and had them check the profiles of all prisoners.”

“And you still couldn’t find him.”

“No. There were a few dozen Caucasians around thirty years old, but they’d have military experience but no burn mark, or they’d have a burn mark but no military experience. We couldn’t find anyone who fit the description perfectly.”

Heiden continued his explanation in a brisk manner.

“That ended up dividing opinions in the FBI. Some suggested the murdered man gave us a false lead. Others said we should partially acknowledge his words as truth and broaden the criteria. Hell, we could comb through each and every prisoner who fits the description. But a prisoner with a clean slate isn’t going to give a confession, no matter how much we interrogate him. That was when someone suggested that we investigate Corvus from within.”

Yuto figured that for the FBI, it was like catching two birds with one stone. It was too risky to send one of their own to infiltrate a dangerous prison to look for a man whom they weren’t even sure existed. But Yuto was already a prisoner, and if he failed or endangered his life, the FBI would not be held responsible. As for Yuto himself, his life depended on it. As such, the FBI probably presumed he would work his ass off without need for further encouragement.

Although Yuto was aware that he was nothing but a convenient and expendable pawn to the FBI, for him this was a deal he had been dreaming of. Failure to find Corvus wasn’t going to lengthen his sentence. He had nothing to lose. But the carrot dangling before his nose was also something that might not even exist. He had to keep that possibility firmly in mind, or else his last light of hope would likely morph into a terrible despair and an even heavier blow.

Yuto made up his mind and informed Heiden of his willingness to take the deal. He didn’t have a single reason to decide otherwise. Thus Yuto was sent into Schelger Prison. He was just like any other prisoner in that he was sent in on these conditions: he would receive no support whatsoever from the FBI, and the only time that he was allowed to make a phone call to them was when he had concrete information. He was given no special privileges.

Before he was sent in, the FBI showed him a list of prisoners who matched some of the traits. There were twelve people, and all were in the west wing. Yuto had engraved their names and faces into his memory.

As they parted, Heiden told him that *corvus* meant “raven” in Latin. True to his name, the man had concealed himself in the crowd of prisoners like a raven blending into the darkness. Freedom would not come to Yuto until he found him.

It was ironic, in a sense; Yuto had spent years cracking down on criminals, and now his only hope lay in a single, diabolic terrorist.

He had fallen asleep without realizing it. Yuto was woken by the familiar and unpleasant ringing of the bell. He opened his eyes to see Dick sitting at the edge of his bed, reading a book. He remembered now whose bed he was hogging, but before he could apologize, the other man spoke.

“It’s last roll call. After this, the doors will be locked until morning. Lights go out at eleven o’clock.”

Yuto nodded and lifted himself up. A low groan escaped his lips at the jarring pain, but he managed to stand up to give his name and inmate number when the guard came around.

Now, he could sleep undisturbed until morning. Yuto sighed in relief and put a hand on the ladder to climb up to the top bunk, only to be stopped by Dick.

“Bad idea,” he said. “Use the bottom bunk. With the shape you’re in, you won’t be able to climb up or down for a while.”

Dick switched their blankets and pillows before giving up his bed to Yuto. It was nice of him to offer, and Yuto accepted without protest. As he sat back down, Dick brought over a plastic cup of water and what looked like a pill.

“Painkillers. I swiped some from the infirmary.” Yuto was again surprised at the unexpected gesture of kindness. Although Dick was brusque, he apparently had a kind side as well. Yuto thanked him before swallowing the pill. Dick watched him, his arms folded across his chest.

“If you’re thinking of telling the guard that you were attacked by BB’s guys, don’t,” he said shortly.

“Because they’ll come back for revenge?”

“That’s one reason. In prison, the guard is everyone’s enemy. Even if you get stabbed, don’t even think of snitching. Remember – we inmates have our own rules. —There’s a Chinese guy in our Block A called Fei. He’s the leader of the Asian inmates. Give your greetings to him tomorrow and get him to allow you into the group.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Dick echoed. “After what you went through on your first day in

prison? Do you have anything substantial in that skull of yours?” he said, raising an eyebrow mockingly. His handsome features coupled with his ironic expression gave him a chillingly heartless look.

“You want to know why BB acted like that toward you in front of everyone? It was to tell them that you were his prey. He might be serious about making you his. You want to be his bitch?”

Yuto’s face tensed, more at Dick’s scornful tone rather than what he was saying.

“Of course not. I’d rather die than become his — ugh!” Dick suddenly grabbed Yuto’s shoulders and pushed him down on the bed. The impact caused a sharp pain in his ribs, making his breath catch.

“You talk big, Lennix, but how are you going to protect yourself in this condition, hm? I can rape you right now and make you realize that you’re powerless alone. Do you have to be taught the hard way?”

Dick suddenly clenched Yuto’s crotch. Yuto was so taken aback that for an instant, he forgot his pain.

“Dick, what the...”

“You can be with me if you don’t want to be with BB. If you agree to be mine and only mine, the other guys will leave you alone. Give your body to me, and I’ll protect it. Think of it as a transaction. Well?”

Yuto was choked by the weight that pressed down upon him, and the vice-like grip on his crotch was painful. He broke into a sweat as he desperately pushed against Dick’s solid chest.

“Get the hell off me!” he said fiercely. “You can try and rape me, but I won’t be your bitch. And to hell with being protected. You think you can insult me like that? Shove it up yours.”

He was frustrated. If it weren’t for this injury, he would have punched the man into the opposite wall. Yuto glared at Dick without bothering to hide his rage. Dick met his gaze unflinchingly. Then, he gave a wan smile and let Yuto go without a struggle.

“You’re tough for what you went through on your first day. We’ll see how long that energy lasts.”

When Yuto realized that he was only being teased, he was incensed but simultaneously relieved. He had been less than excited about having to fear for his chastity around his male cellmate.

“But listen,” Dick continued. “You can struggle all you want, but you’re nothing against a group who’s picked you out as prey. In this place, you clearly belong on the hunted side. But I think you already know. That’s why you’re trying to fool people with that sad stubble of yours, isn’t it?” he said coolly.

Yuto gritted his teeth in anger. Although Dick was simply pointing out something that Yuto already knew, the man’s snide tone made him bristle.

“But you still don’t really know what kind of place this is,” Dick went on. “Underestimate it, it’ll come back to bite you in the ass. Nathan and Micky might be nice to be around, but they’re not going to endanger themselves to protect you. Until you can protect your own hide like them, join a group. Next time you get attacked, you’re on your own. I don’t have the patience and tolerance that Nathan and Micky have. I’d rather not have to wipe your ass for you.” Once Dick finished his clipped remark, he disappeared onto the top bunk, forcing an end to their conversation.

Yuto could barely repress his urge argue back. Who could, when Dick was so quick to assume and so reluctant to listen? Although Dick had said nothing wrong, he could definitely have chosen better words. Who does he think he is, anyway?

Yuto firmly crossed out his impression of Dick as a good guy. Yes, Dick Burnford was an extremely handsome man, but his horrid attitude was enough to dock any points that he made from his good looks.

Continued in [Chapter 3](#).

Deadlock – Chapter 3

Continued from [Chapter 2](#).

“I can think of one good thing that’s happened since getting into prison,” said Matthew, his face still puffy from sleep as they headed back to their cells after breakfast. Yuto asked him what it was.

“I got into the healthy habit of going to bed early and getting up bright and early in the morning. Not like we really get a choice, though.”

Yuto had to agree. After roll call at six-thirty in the morning, breakfast was served starting at seven. Lights went out at eleven o’clock at night. He doubted that even teenagers followed such a regular routine.

During the day, most prisoners were kept busy with their respective duties or some other activity. Some took on jobs within the prison which came with a meagre wage, but it was a wage nonetheless; others attended counselling or programs for education and rehabilitation. Partaking in these tasks every day with diligence led directly to the chance for release on parole or a shortening of their sentence, called “good time”. As such, there were not many lazy prisoners who loafed around without anything to do.

“Are you getting the hang of things at work?” Yuto asked.

“I’m getting there,” Matthew nodded. Through Micky’s connections, he had been able to get a job sorting and delivering mail. As for Yuto, for now he helped Nathan in the library. Newcomers who requested jobs were often first placed in more labour-intensive departments such as cooking or cleaning. In that sense, Yuto and Matthew were lucky to make friends early on with senior prisoners who were willing to look out for them.

After second roll call in their cells, Yuto and Nathan headed to the library in the central wing together. There was already a cluster of prisoners waiting outside the door, waiting to talk to Nathan.

“Business is booming today as always. You never stop getting visitors, do

you?” Yuto said.

“Everyone’s desperate to have their sentence shortened, no matter how slightly.”

A swarm of prisoners came to Nathan daily and formed lines as they waited for their turn to speak to him. Yuto was put in charge of sorting legal files and typing up documents, and was praised by Nathan for being quick to learn. This job reminded Yuto somewhat of his days in university when he had been an assistant to his professor.

“How are you feeling? Don’t strain yourself if you’re not feeling well,” Nathan assured. Nathan was a kind man, and he was always concerned about Yuto’s condition.

“I’m alright,” Yuto answered. “I feel fine.”

Although he still felt unwell three days after the incident, the pain in his ribs was starting to settle down. He was relieved when it looked like he would be spared the bone fracture that he had feared. Even though his face and body were bruised black and blue, he still managed to follow Nathan’s instructions and carry out his work, since it didn’t involve much moving around.

He did, of course, feel the urge to run around looking for Corvus, but for now he had no choice but to gain a solid foothold and get used to life here if he wanted to collect any information at all. And even before that, he had to let his injuries heal – he had to remind his impatient self time and time again.

“I’m sure it’s far from easy to let it go, but you have to bear with it,” Nathan told him. “Impatience won’t do you any good.”

“I know.”

“In most cases, if you walk away from a fight in front of everyone, you’d be looked down on as a coward. That’s why inmates who are concerned about saving face or their manly reputations still go into fights knowing they’ll be put into solitary later. Their motives are understandable, but in the end those people only bring harm upon themselves. Yuto, make sure you don’t get caught up in the moment, either,” Nathan said, in a mild but firm warning. Although Yuto’s anger toward BB’s men still smoldered in the pit of his stomach, being with a

pacifist like Nathan made him realize how stupid he would be to let himself get influenced by the mood around him.

Yuto's liking for Nathan grew stronger the more he got to know the man. It definitely wasn't easy to ignore the influence of others and keep a firm grasp on one's own conscience and rationality, especially when so many unfair deeds went unpunished in this environment. Although Nathan looked serene and mild on the outside, he had a contrasting iron will on the inside.

The prison atmosphere was a combination of two extremes: apathy and hostility. Hot-headed or short-tempered inmates started fights over astonishingly insignificant things, whether it was for making eye contact or bumping arms, or talking behind someone's back. The list went on.

"It's saddening that there's no other way to unleash their pent-up energy except to fight. Interracial conflict is the biggest issue right now. We've been in dangerous territory since the past year," Nathan said glumly, after finishing his last interview for the morning.

"There was a dispute between the blacks and chicanos just last month, and a member of the black gang got stabbed. The Black Soldiers were enraged and attacked the boss of the chicanos, E. Libera, but they ended up being attacked in retaliation instead. Three inmates ended up with critical injuries. Libera was sent to solitary, but that was also to protect him from the black gang."

"What do you mean?" Yuto asked, turning to Nathan from the bookshelf where he had been putting away a legal book.

"In the past, Libera also used to be the leader of the largest chicano street gang outside the walls. He's a man with charisma. If he ended up getting murdered by the blacks, no doubt it would spark an immediate war. You know what happens when a fight breaks out during a ball game, right? Everyone pours out onto the grounds. It's the same in prison. Anyone who stands by and just watches the riot happen is called a coward afterwards. That's why if a riot were to break out, it would spread to every corner of the prison. And once the flame is lit, the war between the blacks and chicanos will spread from within Schelger Prison to the outside world. That's why I hear Warden Corning is trying to persuade the leader of the Black Soldiers not to cause a war."

“You mean BB?”

“No. BB isn’t the official boss yet. He’s still number two.”

“Who’s the real boss?”

“A man called Choker. He’s not even forty yet, but he’s fallen ill with terminal cancer and he’s bedridden in the infirmary. He’s dying, but he’s still respected deeply by the blacks. BB might act like he’s the boss, but he still can’t go against Choker’s orders, at least not publicly. So far, the Warden has been able to persuade Choker to keep things peaceful, and they’re looking for ways to avoid starting a war with the chicanos. But once he dies and BB takes the top spot, we have no idea what would happen. BB’s aggressive, and he’s inclined to fight. By the way, Dick is the one who takes care of Choker most of the time. He’s the only white man that Choker trusts.”

Yuto finally understood the meaning behind BB’s line in the cafeteria.

“Well, no one here would try to pick a fight with Dick, anyway, even without his connection to Choker.”

Indeed, it did seem like everyone kept a distance from Dick, now that Nathan mentioned it.

“Is that because they’re scared of him?”

“Yes. Not because he’s violent, but because he’s an incredibly good fighter. When Dick came in sometime last year, there was a man called Fat Thompson. Had a body like a wrestler. He was a roughneck, and even the gangs didn’t like to associate with him. Thompson took a liking to Dick the moment he came into Schelger, and followed him around mercilessly. Dick kept ignoring him until one day, Thompson attacked him in the showers. But Thompson was the one to get it in the end. At the end of a fierce fight, Dick broke Thompson’s neck.”

“And what happened to Thompson?”

“He died. Dick is definitely someone you wouldn’t mess with. He took down a man the size of a grizzly with his bare hands,” Nathan said with a wry smile. Yuto gazed at him in astonishment.

“Then Dick’s sentence must have been extended by a lot. Even though it was

self-defense.”

“No, it wasn’t. The Thompson murder case still has no suspect. All the other inmates liked Thompson about as much as a cockroach. No one probably came forward to snitch on Dick. And ever since then, no one has tried to start a fight with him. He’s an eyesore for the gangs because he doesn’t try to get on their good side. But on the other hand, he’s not arrogant or boastful, either, so most inmates are civil to him.”

Although Dick was aloof, he also didn’t seem like the type to get involved in a brawl, which was why Nathan’s story came as a surprise to Yuto.

“...Dick told me to join a group. What do you think about it, Nathan?”

“It’s probably best that you do, for your own safety. If you’re part of a powerful group, no one will pick fights with you for fear of repercussions. But that doesn’t mean that you’re home free. No matter how cautious you are, trouble always comes uninvited. They’re like traffic accidents. No matter how much you drive safely and lawfully, that doesn’t stop someone from rear-ending you, does it?”

“You’re right.”

After finishing the morning’s work, Nathan stopped by the canteen, showed his ID card, and bought a carton of cigarettes. The payment was withdrawn from his registered bank account. Any wages one made while doing work in prison was also deposited into the account, which meant inmates who had no savings accumulated the money from their daily labour to buy cigarettes and everyday items.

“It’s a bit late, but here’s a welcome present from me,” Nathan said, offering the wrapped cigarettes to him. Yuto, who was a non-smoker, hesitated. But he remembered being taught that cigarettes substituted for currency here, so he thanked Nathan and accepted it graciously.

“I’ll give you a few examples,” Nathan said. “If you want to use the squash court, you give one box to Alonso, one of the upper members of Locos Hermanos, as a usage fee. If you want prohibited porno magazines, you give two boxes to my brother Micky. If you feel like a midnight snack, you give a box to one of the kitchen crew. There are many different ways to use these. Of course it

helps to have cash, but unless you have a nice girlfriend who'll bring you some, it'll be hard to bring any into this place."

Yuto was aware that considerable amounts of cash passed between hands in prison. Just like narcotics and marijuana, most of the cash came into inmates' hands through the masses of visitors who came in every day.

As a former narcotics agent, it was easy for Yuto to imagine the ways in which these visitors smuggled cash and other items in. Things such as tiny folded bills or drugs wrapped in condoms were probably inserted inside the anus or vagina to be brought in, or even hidden inside heartwarming homemade cookies.

"Alcohol is hard to transport and not much gets around. Most prisoners turn to drugs, which can be enjoyed much more easily. Every time there's a baseball or football game, people bet on the outcome. Enormous amounts of money are transferred, even within a cage like this. And the gangs control all of it. Some guards even co-operate with the gangs to make a little extra cash. That's what this place is like – hopeless."

Nathan invited Yuto out for some fresh air, and turned his steps towards the grounds. Inmates were clustered together in their respective racial groups. Nathan chose a relatively unpopulated place and sat down.

"Yuto, about what you said in the cafeteria. Is it true that you were falsely charged?" he asked hesitantly. Yuto looked at him. In Nathan's hazel eyes he saw the flickering indecision of one who was approaching a sensitive topic. Yuto nodded without breaking eye contact.

"I'm innocent. The victim, Paul, was my best friend. I didn't kill him. I'll swear on it. I was framed. But there's nothing I can do because the physical evidence was all there."

"I see," Nathan answered, his eyes dropping to his feet. He was silent for a while, as if deep in thought. Then, he looked at Yuto again.

"To tell you the truth, so am I," he murmured quietly.

"What?"

"I was falsely charged, too. But I've been keeping it a secret from other inmates because it would create a rift between us. I was put in here two years

ago for a murder I didn't commit."

Yuto was speechless at the sudden and unexpected confession. Nathan smiled sadly at his astonishment. It was a grievous smile of resignation.

"I was sentenced with matricide. My mother was the indecent kind. She slept around. But I still loved her. She was my only family. Someone broke into our house and shot her to death. At the time, my business had just gone down and I was neck-deep in debt. The police must have thought I killed her for her insurance money, and set it up to look like a thief had done it. They kept bringing up evidence that went against me, and didn't even listen to what I had to say. It was unbearable."

Nathan directed a faraway gaze at the inmates on the basketball court trying to steal the ball from each other.

"It's true that everyone who's brought in here is a criminal. They're the misfits of society, the bottom of the bunch. But amongst them, there are those who've been given unreasonably severe sentences, or those who weren't able to get a proper defence because they didn't have the money. I wanted to help those kinds of people, and that's why I'm doing what I do now. But I know some people would laugh. What can a guy do for others when he can't even help himself, right?"

Yuto was deeply moved by Nathan's aspirations. Even though they were in the same unfortunate circumstances, Nathan was acting for others. Mere kindness was not enough to pull off something like this. Yuto was ashamed of himself for lamenting his own misfortune and thinking only of being saved.

"Yuto, if you work hard and serve your sentence properly, it'll get shorter. You've got fifteen years, right? If you're lucky, you could be out on parole as early as halfway through. But in order to do that, you have to be a model inmate and not let yourself get caught up in this poisonous atmosphere. You have to make an effort to get out of here the earliest you can," Nathan pressed. "—Now, let's go to the cafeteria, shall we?"

Yuto watched Nathan from behind as the man got to his feet. He internalized the words that he had just heard. Seven or eight years, if he was lucky. Although it was half of his sentence, it was still much too long for an innocent man like

Yuto.

He knew that he could never be the kind of noble person that Nathan was. No matter how much he struggled, he would never be able to demurely accept his misfortune.

Which left him with no choice but to find Corvus. There was no other way out of here.

Two weeks passed since the day he came to Schelger Prison. Yuto began to check up on the FBI's list of inmates within the best of his abilities. But that didn't mean he could simply walk up to them and start a conversation or sniff about their surroundings. He began by discreetly observing the targets when he saw them in the cafeteria or rec room, and confirming what kind of people they associated with.

Yuto made sure to keep his attitude strictly geared for investigation. He knew that bringing personal feelings or motives into his actions would cloud his judgement and make him lose his calm.

This was a special mission, assigned to Yuto Lennix, former narcotic investigator of the DEA. An undercover operation in prison to chase down an abominable terrorist. He felt like he'd become the protagonist of some third-rate movie, and nearly let slip a laugh of derision. But if switching his mentality to be on the job would help his situation turn for the better, so be it. He would become an awkward Superman or farcical Spiderman any day. So be it.

Micky had taken quite a liking to Matthew. They now did everything together, and Micky took good care of the younger man. Although Micky was a joker, the breadth of his social network was not to be taken lightly. Now that Matthew was known among the other inmates as Micky's younger brother of sorts, his chastity still remained protected. However, he was still subjected to frequent ass-grabs made in passing, or crude pickup lines. Some inmates were particularly tenacious, making advances whenever they had the chance. But even innocent and unsuspecting Matthew appeared to have taken Yuto's attack incident to heart, and was now cautious to the point of cowardly. Thanks to that, he had yet to be raped.

Yuto, on the other hand, lived every day in an eerily peaceful calm. For now it seemed he was free from the clutches of BB. None of the inmates subjected him to the routine newcomer-bullying, perhaps because BB had picked on him on his first day. In fact, most inmates seemed reluctant even to interact with Yuto, likely fearful of the danger involved with picking on BB's prey.

"Yuto, let's go to the rec room," said Micky one day after dinner, as Yuto was reading a book in his cell. Matthew, of course, was with him. The rec room was an ideal location for inmates to mingle, and they could interact with other blocks without inhibition. Yuto agreed to go along, figuring he would be able to observe his targets if he found any there.

As the three of them set off together down the hall, Yuto looked out one of the windows and spotted Dick and Nathan outside. The two of them were sitting on a bench off to the side of the abandoned basketball court in the fading sunlight, immersed in deep conversation.

"Hey, Micky," Matthew said. "There's Dick and Nathan over there. Let's invite them, too."

"Leave 'em," Micky said dismissively, shaking his head. "When they're talking in a secluded spot like that, it means they don't want to be disturbed."

"Why? Are they talking about something important?"

Micky cocked an eyebrow at him. "No, you idiot, they're professing their love for each other."

"What?" cried Matthew in astonishment. "They're in *that* kind of relationship?" Micky snorted at his response. Matthew pouted when he realized that he'd been duped.

"That wasn't fair," he said sourly.

"No, no. I didn't exactly lie to you. They're not lovers, but they do get along really well. They're — how would I say it — on the same wavelength. Nathan trusts Dick a lot, and Dick only lets his guard down around Nathan. They're one of the few lucky people to have a best friend in prison."

Now that Micky mentioned it, Yuto did realize that Dick and Nathan occasionally talked alone with each other like this. The sight of them wandering

the outskirts of the grounds or sitting in a corner talking secretively, created a strange, exclusive mood about them.

“Oh, but it looks like they’re done. They’re coming this way.”

“The grounds are going to be locked soon. Alright, let’s give them a shout.”

Once Nathan and Dick came inside through the central gates, Micky invited them to the rec room as well. Nathan smiled and nodded, but Dick turned them down aloofly, claiming he was tired. But Micky was not one to give in easily.

“But it’s Sunday night,” he urged. “Let’s all go and have a good time. Come along. Come on.”

“Micky, I’d like to rest in my room.”

“Hey, man, Dick. Mr. I’m Too Cool For You. You can put on an act all you like, but you’re not gonna impress the dudes in here. No cute girls to gush over your I-don’t-give-a-damn attitude. Knock off the act and let’s take easy, eh?”

Dick finally gave in to Micky’s tenacity. “Alright, fine. Just shut up, okay?” he said, covering Micky’s mouth with a rough hand. Dick occasionally acted jokingly like this around Micky, who was boisterous and loved to fool around.

Every time he saw Dick like this, Yuto could not help but wonder why Dick acted so coldly around him. Dick’s aloofness toward Yuto had not changed, and even though they slept and woke in the same cell, they had yet to have a decent conversation. Although Dick was a man of few words, the fact that he could have long conversations with Nathan probably meant that he didn’t despise communication altogether.

Yuto had concluded that Dick simply did not talk to him because he didn’t like him. Yuto also did his best not to initiate unnecessary conversation, in case this was true.

However, it was unexpectedly stressful to have to behave as if a person didn’t exist when you were close enough to hear him breathing. On several occasions, Yuto wished they could at least break the ice enough to casually talk about the weather. He would settle for that, if being friends was asking for too much. But this sort of hopeful expectation was always dashed by Dick’s unfathomable and impenetrable attitude. The distance between them had not changed at all since

the day Yuto first arrived in prison.

What did Dick dislike so much about him? Yuto didn't remember saying anything particularly offensive to him, and he certainly had not earned a grudge by behaving rudely. True, he may have caused some trouble for Dick on his first day by getting injured, but he had been the victim. He wasn't quite convinced that it was enough to warrant Dick's aversion. Besides, Dick had been just as rude by pinning an injured Yuto on the bed. They were even.

If there was a specific reason for Dick not liking him, Yuto wished the man would come out and say so. But Yuto was not very inclined to be the one to ask Dick what he didn't like about him. He felt like he would make himself vulnerable.

The spacious rec room was teeming with inmates, typical of a Sunday night. Micky spotted an open table with a hawk-like eye, and swiftly ran over to claim their seats. Yuto sipped on a lukewarm soda — Micky's treat — as he took in his surroundings.

Some groups were engrossed in a game of cards. Other groups were enjoying spirited conversation. In the back, there were also billiard, foosball, and speedball tables, but those were dominated by the gangs. Inmates who could not participate distracted themselves from boredom by spectating the outcome of the game.

Sundays were still enveloped in the lively mood of day off from work, even in a place like this, cut off from the rest of society. In the morning there was Sunday service in the prison church for Christians, and factory workers were given the day off. Visitors also came in droves, and the entire mood of the prison was often giddy right up until the end of the day. Right now, two hours remained until the last roll call. On the surface, at least, everyone seemed to be enjoying the last precious hours of their evening off.

Micky took a pack of cards out of his pocket and proposed a game of poker. When Yuto asked if they were going to bet packs of cigarettes, Micky instead pulled out a handful of small coins from his opposite pocket.

"We'll use these coins instead of poker chips. We'll each get an equal number. Five-stud, but no other particular rules. Everyone has to participate in every deal. You're allowed to check."

“It’s hard to take this seriously when we’re not betting anything real,” Matthew let slip. Micky grinned slyly as he shuffled the cards.

“My dear boy, did you think we’d play a game of poker without betting anything? The number of coins you finish with determines if you win or lose. The loser has a punishment waiting for him: the winner gets to dare him to do anything.”

“Oh, come on, I don’t wanna do dares,” Matthew protested, but to no avail. The poker game began. All the members studied their cards as they put coins down or folded, round after round. A large portion of poker involved psychological strategies. Yuto carefully observed each of the four members sitting around the table. Micky scowled or swore exaggeratedly every time he looked at his hand, but he was most likely bluffing. Nathan wore a constant smile, and Dick wore a poker face in the most literal sense. Other than Matthew, whose expression was easy to read, it was hard to guess what kind of hand everyone had.

At the end of the third round, Yuto was in second place. Dick was first. Yuto did not want to lose to him, and his feeling of rivalry led him to step up the game. Yuto had a full house, and was confident that he could win. Micky, who was in third place, seemed be eager to win against Yuto, for he also went all in with the coins he had.

But when it came time for showdown, there was a plot twist that no one had anticipated. Micky’s hand was a straight flush.

“No way. You didn’t rig the cards when you dealt them, did you?” Yuto protested in disbelief, having lost everything so close to the end of the game.

“Why, I never,” said Micky, the victor, wearing a sly grin. “Well, I have the very best dare saved up for a sore loser like you. Yuto, go over to the sisters’ table, pick someone to your liking, and tell her this: ‘Mademoiselle, will you please let me kiss your beautiful hand?’”

“...You’re kidding, right?”

“There is no kidding in this game, my man,” Micky said firmly, throwing his chest out in triumph. Yuto threw a glance at the table of sisters. A flashy group of about ten people or so, their genders almost indistinguishable, chatted loudly

as they dominated two tables. They were a gaudy bunch who stood out clearly from their surroundings.

By ‘sisters’, they meant cross-dressing gay men. The sisters always wore full faces of makeup with nail polish on their nails, and stood out in prison. Of course, they could not cross-dress to a tee, but they made diligent efforts to look feminine within the possible limits; they cinched the hems of of their prison uniforms to look slimmer at the waist, wore lace camisoles underneath, or wrapped large cloths around their waists like skirts.

“Go on, Yuto. Or do you not even have the balls to pick up a girl?” Micky teased. Yuto gave him a withering stare.

“But they aren’t girls.”

“If you ignore what’s between their legs, they’re all adorable girls at heart. And all of them *love* a good-looking man.”

No one in their group showed any sign of intercepting Micky’s mischief. Nathan and Matthew were busy trying not to laugh. Even Dick, out of all people, was smirking, watching to see what Yuto would do next.

Yuto swore inwardly as he continued to stare at the sisters. Then he suddenly noticed something. A man was saying something to an olive-skinned sister sitting near the wall at the farthest end of the table. The man was one of the inmates listed as a Corvus candidate. Joe Giverly, a resident of Block B.

Yuto instantly stood from his seat.

“Fine, I’ll go. I’ll get back at you for this, Micky,” he said, pretending to be grumpy as he headed toward the sisters’ table. The ladies instantly ceased their chatter as Yuto approached carefully. Their gazes raked up and down Yuto’s body.

“What do you want, boy?” said a plump black sister humorously. “Looking for a blowjob?” The group burst into raucous laughter. Yuto took a look around at all of the sisters and furtively looked at Giverly. Giverly appeared uninterested in Yuto, and continued to speak earnestly to the Latina-looking sister.

“Come on, Tonya. I didn’t mean no harm. Cindy was just having such a fit and making so much noise that I lashed out. I couldn’t help it. I’ll never do it again.

Won't you let me start over with her?" he begged desperately.

"You've got some nerve, haven't you?" Tonya replied coldly, her voice husky. "How many times is it now that you've hurt her? Cindy's had enough. She said she's never going to be with a man like you again," Tonya's appearance was, in a word, eye-catching. Her age was hard to guess, but her long, glossy hair was tied back tightly at the top of her head. Her shapely face was already beautiful by itself, and was only accentuated by her modest makeup.

"Yeah, but..."

"That's enough. Come near her again, and you'll have to deal with me. Now get out of my sight. I'm sick of seeing your obnoxious face," Tonya spat, turning her face aside in disdain. Giverly's attitude took a sudden turn.

"Who do you think you are, huh, fag? Getting on your high horse because I'm showing you some manners? Think you're above me now, huh?" Giverly's temper snapped as he grabbed something out of his pocket. A small blade protruded from his fist – it was a small box cutter. Yuto swiftly grabbed Giverly's arm.

"Stop it," Yuto muttered into Giverly's ear, holding him back with as much strength as he could muster. "Not exactly peaceful, are you? What do you think you're going to do with that?"

"Who the hell're you? Let the fuck go!"

"Calm down," Yuto said to him. "What's gonna come of this? —Look, the guard is looking at you."

Giverly gave a startled glance at the guard standing near the wall, and his face turned rigid when he realized that the guard's gaze was fixed on them. He slowly began to make his way toward them, apparently noticing the change in Giverly's attitude. Giverly was as stiff as a board.

"Hey, Giverly. What's going on here?"

"N-Nothing, sir."

Yuto furtively extracted the box cutter from Giverly's hand as the man bumbled unintelligibly. He slipped the knife into his own pocket before the guard

could notice.

“Show me your hands. Hurry up.”

He had escaped by a hair. Giverly cowered as he showed his open palms to the guard. The guard, still unsatisfied, gave Giverly a pat-down. When he found nothing on him, the guard let Giverly off with a verbal warning.

“I don’t want to see you causing trouble,” he said as he left.

“I’ll put this back in your pocket, but don’t go swinging it around again.” Yuto returned the box cutter to Giverly and patted him on the shoulder. “Temper cooled off a bit now?”

Giverly seemed to have lost all will to fight, and nodded with a pale face.

“Y-Yeah. I’m fine. I’ll get going so the guard won’t get suspicious.” Giverly strode away in a hurry, looking unsettled. Yuto watched him leave and mentally crossed him off his list of Corvus candidates. Giverly’s impatience and lack of foresight, along with his contrasting lack of backbone, made him anything but cut out to be a terrorist leader who stood at the head of a cult organization.

The sisters erupted into a storm of complaints once Giverly was out of sight.

“He’s so quick to lose his temper. What a hopeless case.”

“He can only act like that when people are weaker than him.”

None of the other sisters seemed to notice that Giverly had been trying to pull a knife on Tonya, but Tonya herself had noticed.

“Thank you for helping me back there,” said Tonya. “That was a close call. If he’d left a mark on my face, I would have had to spend every day in tears from the shock.”

Yuto turned to face her.

“You must be new,” Tonya said.

“Hi. I’m Yuto Lennix, from Block A.”

The olive-skinned sister kept her legs crossed as she turned up the corners of her lips in a seductive manner. It was as if she were fully aware of what kind of smile made her look most attractive.

“I’m Tonya. You’re the new boy who’s in the same cell as Mr. Handsome, Dick Burnford, right? I hear BB already claimed you from day one? Pity on you, being chased around by a beast like him. Is that cute butt of yours still intact?” There was admittedly something sexy about her teasing husky voice. Yuto felt like he was talking to an escort or a dancer whose voice had turned gravelly from days spent drinking and smoking.

“Safe for now,” he said, giving her a wry smile.

“So, something you want to discuss with me? I’m sorry, but I don’t talk business in the rec room.”

For an instant, Yuto wondered what she meant. But it didn’t take him long to realize what these ladies meant by business. Yuto shook his head in embarrassment.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“How can I help you, then?”

Yuto finally remembered what he had come for in the first place. The dare — he had to ask one of them for permission for a kiss. Yuto decided on Tonya, and hesitantly broached the topic.

“I want to ask you for a favour. I know I might be being rude and intruding, but if you don’t mind, I was wondering if you’d, um... let me kiss your hand.”

The sisters, who had been listening in on their conversation, let out excited squeals. Yuto felt his face burn with embarrassment. He mentally damned Micky as he turned around to look at the man. Micky was on his feet and waving his arms around excitedly.

Tonya noticed Micky’s reaction and broke into a smile. “Oh, dear,” she said. “Did you lose a bet against that joker Micky?”

Yuto was equally grateful and relieved for Tonya’s sharp eye and understanding.

“I lost to him in a game of poker, and I have to do a dare.”

“I see. I don’t mind a kiss on the hand at all, but on one condition: you have to come to my cell tomorrow for tea. First floor in Block C, the cell at the very end.

Understood?”

Yuto agreed promptly. The gushing sisters were attracting the attention of the inmates around them, and some were glancing this way. He was eager to get it over with and leave.

“Saturday after lunch, then. I’ll be waiting.” With that, Tonya held out her slender hand elegantly as a lady of nobility would do. Yuto took her hand, bent forward and gently pressed his lips against the back of Tonya’s hand. He felt no revulsion at all, despite the fact that he was fully aware that Tonya was a man. Perhaps it was because of her dignified beauty.

When Yuto lifted his face and tried to express his gratitude with a stiff smile, Tonya smiled back amiably as if she were talking to an old friend.

“Is Tonya the only one to get a kiss?” the sisters protested. “That’s not fair! Give me one, too!” They gushed like adolescent girls as they flocked around Yuto and clung to him. Yuto managed to manoeuvre his way out, getting somewhat rumpled along the way, and fled back to his table.

“What were you talking about with Giverly?” Nathan asked worriedly when he came back.

“I told him to calm down because his temper was getting out of hand,” Yuto said casually. Micky leaned in toward him, the picture of enjoyment.

“You’ve got balls, Yuto. You were pretty brave to ask Tonya for a kiss. You might’ve been dead if Libera wasn’t in solitary right now,” he said, clapping his hands in glee. Yuto gave him a questioning glance.

“Libera? The boss of Locos Hermanos? What do you mean, I might have been dead?”

“Tonya is Libera’s girl, but before she got with him, she used to be close with Henry, the boss of the white gang, ABL. To top it off, she’s pretty much the head of the sisters, too. You won’t find anyone prettier than Tonya in Schelger Prison, but you’re as good as dead if you try to make any moves on her.”

Yuto sighed. This was information he would have wanted *before* he did what he did. If he’d known, he wouldn’t have asked such a risky person like Tonya for a kiss. The last thing he wanted was to earn an unwanted grudge over something

as trivial as a dare from a poker game.

“You should be fine,” Nathan smiled reassuringly. “Libera’s a guy with a big heart. Even if someone tries to flirt with Tonya, he’ll take it as a sign of how attractive his girl is, and he won’t get angry about it. But Henry Galen, on the other hand, you should watch out for.”

Yuto’s ears pricked at the last name he mentioned. Henry Galen was one of the people he was investigating. From what Yuto could make of his past history, Galen was a likelier candidate for Corvus than any of the others.

“What kind of guy is he?”

“The big guy over there with the shaved head,” Micky said, pointing at the billiard table at the back of the room. Yuto glanced over and saw a man he presumed to be Galen, holding a pool cue with one hand and his free arm around the waist of a pretty young man, whispering something into his ear. The young man, slender and delicate like a boy, rested his head on the towering man’s shoulder as if basking in his attention.

“He’s a white-supremacist neo-Nazi. Apparently he was in a right-wing extremist group before he got in here, so it’s ingrained in him. He’s an intimidating cold-blooded bastard. I’d be careful if I were you.”

“Who’s the guy with him?”

“Galen’s girl. His name’s Lindsay. He’s only been here for about a year, but he’s been able to get himself on Galen’s good side, and now he acts like some kind of queen. He’s like a prepubescent girl next to Tonya, but as you can see, Galen’s got bad taste.”

“Really?” Matthew butted in. “I think Lindsay’s way cuter. I’d go out with him if I had to choose.”

Micky gave Matthew a stern knock upside the head.

“You know, it weren’t for me, you’d be part of that gang of sisters over there, sashaying your way around prison. You’ve no right to be blabbering on about your preferences in women.”

Matthew sullenly shut his mouth at the scolding from Micky.

“Tonya invited me to visit her cell,” Yuto said. “Do you think it’d be alright if I went?” Micky swelled with pride at being asked for advice, and dispensed it with a grin.

“Must be the sisters’ tea party. No harm in taking part. If you’re scared of going into Block C by yourself, I’ll go to Tonya’s cell with you.”

“That’d be a relief,” Yuto gave Micky a smile, grateful for his consideration. All the while he wondered if there was any way he could glean information about Henry Galen from Tonya.

When it neared time for the last roll call of the day, Yuto and his group headed back to their cells.

“You calmed Giverly down pretty well back there in the rec room. He had a knife or something, didn’t he?” Dick said, standing in front of Yuto. They had finished roll call and Yuto was now reading the paper.

“You saw? From that far away?” Yuto asked in surprise.

“No, actually,” Dick shook his head. “I couldn’t see what he was holding, but I could guess from how he moved and how you stopped him. You took it from him and slipped it in your pocket when the guard came, didn’t you? Why did you cover for his ass?”

“Just because. No special reason.” In reality, Yuto had wanted to help Giverly because he sensed how agitated and fearful the man was feeling, not because he was a subject of investigation.

“You were staring at Giverly from the beginning. Were you interested in him?”

Although Yuto had no idea what kind of “interest” Dick was referring to, he was nonetheless impressed by the man’s sharp observational eye.

“Not really. He just wouldn’t stop talking to the sister I wanted to ask a kiss from. I was looking at him wishing he would get out of the way.”

Dick seemed to want to say something more, but appeared to change his mind and let it slide as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

“...You’re awfully talkative today,” Yuto commented. “What’s the matter?”

Dick shrugged. “I just felt like making conversation.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“Who knows. Maybe it’s because you’re starting to act a lot more like a proper inmate.”

“Is that an insult or a compliment?” Yuto scowled.

“That’s for you to figure out,” Dick said with a slight smile. “So, why did you choose Tonya for the kissing dare? Is it because she’s pretty?”

Yuto wasn’t about to tell him that he wanted to get close to her for information about Giverly. He thought of another excuse that would sound plausible.

“Tonya looked a little like my mother. Her name is Letizia — she’s a *chicana*.”

Dick gazed at Yuto’s face with bewilderment.

“You’ve got Latin-American blood in you?”

“No, Letizia is my stepmother. She remarried my Japanese-American dad when I was ten. Letizia had a son from her previous marriage who was three years older than me. We spoke a mix of English and Spanish at home, and thanks to that, I can speak Spanish and Spanglish pretty much fluently.”

Spanglish was a mixture of English and Spanish used by Latinos living in the United States, almost a new language in itself.

“Where’s your family now?” Dick asked.

“My dad died in a car crash two years ago. Leti was prone to illness, so she moved to Arizona to live with her older sister for support. She took Lupita along, my twelve-year-old little sister, who was born to her and my dad. My stepbrother, Paco, is working for the LAPD.”

Two years ago, Yuto had lamented and grieved the departure of his father, who had died much too young. The grief had yet to fade, but one fortunate thing was that his father had died without having to see Yuto in such a state of degradation.

“Your brother’s a police officer?”

“Yeah. A guy with smarts who knows what he’s doing, unlike me.” Yuto felt like he had swallowed a lump of lead every time he thought of his stepbrother, so heavy was his heart when he thought of how Paco had to live as a police officer with a criminal for a brother. But never once did Paco blame Yuto for it. On the contrary, he had sent messages of encouragement over and over. Even after Yuto had been sentenced as guilty, Paco had told him through tears that he would still believe in him no matter what.

Yuto had first left home for college, and after graduating, had landed a job at the DEA in New York. That meant he was only able to see his family once or twice a year, but they were still irreplaceable to him. Despite their differences in skin colour and lack of blood relation, they still had an unbreakable bond that far exceeded those ties.

Yuto had strongly asked for Paco not to come in for visitations, since he would only feel worse seeing him in person. So instead, he received a letter from his stepbrother two days ago.

It talked about Leti, who was in the hospital from her bad condition. It talked about Lupita, who was living with her aunt and cousins and doing well. Paco informed him that he himself was also doing well. *Once you feel ready, you let me know. I’ll go right over there to see you*, the letter had said in closing.

“How about you? Where’s your family?” asked Yuto. Dick shook his head.

“I have none. I grew up in an orphanage.”

“I see,” Yuto murmured briefly. He knew he sounded cold, but he did not want to throw out halfhearted words of pity simply for the sake of social graces. Although they hadn’t known each other long, he could tell that Dick wasn’t the type to appreciate insincere sympathies.

“...So you’ve been alone since leaving the orphanage?”

“Pretty much. But once I was a grown adult, I had my own friends. I had lovers. But now I’ve lost everything.”

If Dick had lost everything dear to him because of prison, it was a hard story to hear. No matter how intimate you were with someone, that didn’t guarantee that they would still be accepting of a criminal.

Yuto was suddenly curious about what Dick had been sentenced with. What had he done to be put in here? How many years would he be in here for?

But at the same time, Yuto was hesitant to put his questions into words. For the majority of prisoners, this topic was a wound that they preferred to be left untouched.

The bell rang, signalling lights out. Dick climbed up to his own bunk. A few moments later, the lights were shut off.

Don't nose around, Yuto told himself. Within these walls, there were some things that were better left in the dark.

Continued in [Chapter 4](#).

Deadlock – Chapter 4

Continued from [Chapter 3](#).

After lunch, they went through a lock-up and roll call. When the cell doors were opened again, the block resumed its usual chatter. Countless voices, footsteps, music, and sounds from the television melded together into one familiar din that filled the whole building.

Yuto was washing his hands at the sink. While he was at it, he looked into the mirror and casually swept his hair back. His overgrown hair and beard were, admittedly, starting to look unattractive.

“Lennix, no use in preening and getting your hopes up. Tonya’s a faithful one. Not gonna happen.”

Yuto looked blankly at Dick’s reflection behind him in the mirror.

“What’s not gonna happen?”

“I understand. You’re starting to miss women. I know how you feel, but I wouldn’t go near her if I were you. She’s not someone you can handle.”

Dick appeared to be under the mistaken impression that Yuto was visiting Tonya out of some ulterior motive. It offended Yuto enough to make his temper rise.

“Stop being an idiot,” he snapped. “That’s not why I’m going to see her.”

Dick ignored his protests and nodded sagely. “No need to get defensive,” he said. “I won’t deny it – Tonya’s beautiful. No one’s to blame for feeling that way. She pulls it off so perfectly looks-wise, you couldn’t tell her from any other woman.”

“I told you it’s not like that,” Yuto said shortly. “—What, are you jealous? Because a newcomer like me got invited?”

“No, unfortunately, because I’ve also been invited to Tonya’s cell. So we might as well go together. You don’t need to ask Micky. I’ll escort you to Block C

instead.”

Yuto hastily trailed after Dick as the man strode swiftly out of the cell. He had no idea what was happening.

“So you’re going to visit Tonya, too? Are you friends with her?”

“Close enough to get invited to the occasional tea party. I hardly go, but this time Tonya asked me to come with you.”

Yuto could see why the sisters would be all over a handsome guy like Dick, but what surprised him more was that Dick had agreed to the invitation. When Yuto told him so, Dick gave a wan smile.

“I just thought it’d be a pity to let an ignorant little boy like you go all by yourself. The sisters’ tea party is more horrifying than you can imagine.”

Yuto felt a sudden creeping fear at Dick’s threatening remark. What if he were to get attacked by the sisters and stripped naked the moment he set foot inside Tonya’s cell? No, that was going too far, even for them, he told himself.

Matthew came running up to them when they descended onto the ground floor.

“Yuto, Dick! Where’re you guys going? Tonya’s place? Can I come? Take me with you!”

“No,” Dick said flatly. “No uninvited guests allowed.”

Matthew pouted.

“I’ll ask if you can come next time,” Yuto reassured him. With that, he and Dick left Block A together.

“I don’t know if the kid is starting to get used to prison, but he’s starting to let his guard down too much. I saw him walking with a chicano inmate the other day.”

“What’s wrong with that? Can’t he talk to a chicano?”

“I didn’t say that. But the whole group is restless and irritated lately because Libera hasn’t been released from solitary.”

Every prisoner seemed irritable to a newcomer like Yuto, but he figured Dick

was sensing the more subtle changes of mood within the prison.

“Libera is Tonya’s lover, right? He isn’t out of solitary yet?”

“No. Libera’s influence over the chicanos is immense. If they let him out and he got killed by the blacks, it’d cause a riot that would spread to every prison in California. And that wouldn’t be the least of it. That’s why the guards are having a hard time deciding when to let him out.”

“People won’t think I’m hitting on Tonya while her boyfriend’s locked up, will they, if I go to her tea party?”

Dick laughed it off and said Yuto was taking himself too seriously. Yuto pursed his lips reproachfully. “I didn’t mean it to sound like that. I’m just trying to avoid unwanted trouble.”

Dick had since opened up a lot more after the incident in the rec room. He no longer seemed to mind responding to Yuto’s comments, and in turn Yuto could let his guard down and be more like himself. It no longer felt awkward to be alone with Dick.

The two of them went through a security check upon arriving at Block C. The guard seemed oddly careful while giving Dick a pat-down. Dick was no troublemaker; even if he did cause trouble, he certainly did it out of the public eye. Neither was he the type of ruffian that the guards always had their hands full with. But perhaps his impenetrable calm gave off some foreboding aura that made him seem unpredictable.

Indeed, there was something unique about Dick’s presence. He could look relaxed, but he was still on guard and fully aware. He had an aura about him that made people step aside and make way when they crossed paths. He was intimidating although he made no effort to be. Their fellow inmates were likely not the only ones who sensed a brewing danger radiating from Dick.

“Haven’t you gone to say hi to Fei yet?” Dick said, turning to him once they passed through the gates. Yuto recalled the piece of advice that Dick had once given him about the Chinese boss, who was also a senior inmate of Block A.

“I did, but I didn’t ask to be a part of his gang.”

“Why not?”

“I know we’re both Asians, but we’re from different countries. We obviously think differently and have different customs. I was born and raised here as an American. I’ve never affiliated myself with any specific ethnic group. Just because we’re the same skin colour, there’s nothing to guarantee we’ll get along, right?”

“I can see that,” Dick acceded, “but skin colour is important in prison.” Unlike their last disagreement, Dick did not refute Yuto outright this time, and here he was even accompanying him to the sisters’ tea party. Yuto wondered if this was a sign that he had earned at least some acknowledgement from the man.

“Then I’ll ask you something,” Yuto said. “Going by your argument, Block C should be conflict-free — but is it? They’re all Latinos, but you’ve still got the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and everyone else. You still have cultural differences between the same Spanish-speaking peoples. Either way, conflict is bound to happen.”

Ethnic groups formed their own clustered communities even outside the walls of prison: the Mexicans came together in California and Texas; the Puerto Ricans in New York; the Cubans in Miami. Even in an enclosed and unusual environment like prison, Yuto found it hard to believe that people would easily tear down the barriers of race and live harmoniously together.

“You’re right,” Dick agreed. “I guess if the blacks and whites disappeared, we’d be seeing conflicts amongst Latinos themselves next. But for now the number of chicanos far outweighs everyone else, so that probably won’t be an immediate problem.”

It was natural for people to band together to protect themselves, and the easiest way was to band together based on skin colour. Inmates had no choice but to rely on a visually obvious common identity.

The prison was like its own miniature society. Currently the number of Latinos in the United States had fast exceeded the African-American population to become the largest minority in the country. And out of those Latinos, the majority were chicanos. Naturally, they were also the most influential group in prison.

“Just to let you know,” Dick said as he stopped in front of the furthest cell and

turned to face Yuto. “There are no racial conflicts in the cell we’re about to enter right now. It doesn’t matter if you’re white, black, brown, or yellow — everyone gets together and runs their mouths off about men, food, and fashion. Are you ready?” he said, as if to herald an impending battle. Raucous voices could already be heard seeping from the cell, but a cloth covering the entrance blocked the view of what was going on inside. When Yuto nodded tensely, Dick stood at the entrance and called out quietly.

“Ladies, would you be so kind as to let us into your secret garden?”

The cloth was swiftly pulled back to reveal a black sister who cooed and visibly melted.

“Girls,” she called, “Dick is here! So is the young gentleman who kissed Tonya’s hand!”

A chorus of screams followed, and a countless number of hands reached out of the cell to yank Dick and Yuto inside. Although Yuto had steeled himself somewhat, he was still struck speechless by the scene before him. It far exceeded what he had imagined. The cell appeared to house two, and was far more spacious than the cell that Yuto and Dick shared. But crammed inside were about ten sisters, all fighting for space. He felt dizzy from the strong smell of cosmetics and perfume that filled the air.

Dick and Yuto were thoroughly jostled and felt up by the sisters, almost like movie stars surrounded by rabid fans, as they made their way through the cell. They received the occasional welcoming kiss as they were spun around and finally forcibly separated and sat down apart from each other on the two beds. The sisters then fought amongst themselves for seats beside either of them.

“It’s so wonderful that you could come, Yuto. And Dick, I’m glad to see you, too,” Tonya smiled at them serenely from her seat at the back of the cell. Yuto was handed a brimming cup of tea and finally felt his heart begin to settle.

“Help yourself to some cookies, too,” Tonya offered. “I made them myself.”

Yuto had no idea where she could have gotten the ingredients or baked them, but Tonya’s cookies were pleasantly sweet, crumbly, and flavourful.

“Tonya, when will Libera get out?” Dick asked.

“Soon,” Tonya said, lighting a cigarette. “But once he comes out, it’ll be because for a whole new set of problems.”

“Choker isn’t planning anything against Locos Hermanos. It’ll be alright.”

“I hope so. BB hasn’t been taking Choker seriously these days. We can’t let our guard down.”

As the two were engaged in serious conversation, Yuto was left helpless in the hands of an older sister sitting beside him, who was busy touching and stroking his face to satisfaction. The plump sister’s eyes were shining as she brought her makeup-laden face right up to Yuto’s.

“Ladies,” she exclaimed loudly, “don’t you think this boy would look better without the beard?”

The other sisters raised voices of assent, one after another. Yuto himself had no choice but to smile wryly in response. He already knew his facial hair didn’t suit him.

“I know!” the sister piped up. “Why don’t we shave it off? Hm, kid?”

“What?” Yuto protested. “No, I don’t think that’s—”

“Hear, hear! Shave it off!” The sisters shrieked as several of them teamed up to push Yuto down against the bed. Yuto was convinced that it was a joke until he saw one of them approach with a razor and shaving foam. He frantically turned to Dick for help.

“Dick! A little help here!”

“I agree with the ladies,” Dick said. “Might as well shave off that unappealing stubble of yours.”

Yuto’s face turned rigid at being abandoned by his only ally.

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t, Yuto.” Tonya said. “Frankly, I don’t think facial hair looks good on you, either.”

That was the finishing blow. Abandoned now even by Tonya, Yuto resigned himself to his fate. Come what may, he thought. Once he stopped resisting, the sisters proceeded most gleefully to lather foam all over Yuto’s face and shave off his beard while chattering animatedly. They finished off by wiping his face clean

with a wet towel.

“See? Look at this cutie-pie now! What were you thinking, hiding such a pretty face with a beard?”

“And your skin! It’s so smooth, ugh, it makes me so jealous! I can see why men would be all over you!”

That’s why I was growing a beard — so they would stay away from me, Yuto came close to retorting. But he knew it would only make him look bad to say it now. He kept his silence as he absently stroked his clean-shaven chin.

“All done now, Yuto,” said the sister. “Look, Tonya. Isn’t he handsome now?”

Tonya widened her eyes and let out an exclamation of surprise when Yuto sat up.

“Wow,” she said. “You *are* quite something, handsome. I’m surprised. Aren’t you, Dick?” Tonya turned to the man for agreement. Dick’s astonishment was apparent on his face. An unlit cigarette hung from his mouth.

“...You’re right,” he nodded. “He had a good facial structure to begin with, but I didn’t expect him to look so different without facial hair.”

It was unbearable to have Dick staring at him. Yuto covered the lower half of his face with his left hand.

“Stop looking at me,” he mumbled in a muffled voice.

“What’s to be bashful about?” Dick sniffed derisively. “You’re acting like a girl who’s had her bra snatched.”

Yuto felt his cheeks burn, but not from anger. It was from intense embarrassment. He felt uneasy showing his clean-shaven face; it felt akin to standing stark naked in front of everyone. None of the people here had seen him without his beard, after all.

The mood was lively for a while on the topic of Yuto’s face. Yuto was eager to glean some information about Henry Galen from Tonya, but it was difficult to find the chance. He cast his thoughts around on how broach the topic, and was still doing so when the curtain was suddenly swept aside to reveal a young man.

He was the pretty man who had been with Galen earlier. The man took an

imperious sweeping glance around the room. When his eyes fell on Dick, he suddenly grinned.

“I see you’re visiting, Dick. No wonder it was noisier than usual.”

“Hey, Lindsay. How’s it going?”

“Not bad.”

Lindsay was not wearing makeup like the other sisters, and wore her prison uniform normally. The lack of embellishments was not due to her lack of fashion sense; on the contrary, she seemed to be flaunting her confidence in her beauty — as if to say she knew she was already more beautiful than anyone here.

The black sister who had shaved Yuto’s face spoke up.

“Lindsay,” she said sharply. “What do you want?”

Lindsay threw a cold glance at her, then turned to Tonya, instantly rearranging her face to look earnest.

“Tonya, listen to what happened to me. Just the other day, I gave in and went to bed with Sammy Porter because he wouldn’t stop bothering me about it, and guess what? He didn’t even pay up! It’s unbelievable, I’m furious! Won’t you talk to him for me?”

“I can’t believe what you’re doing,” Tonya said in exasperation. “You’re still selling yourself when you have Galen? You know the trouble you’ll get into if he finds out, don’t you?”

“I’ll be fine. But won’t you ask Sammy to pay up for me? I’m sure if it’s coming from you—”

“No,” Tonya said coldly. Lindsay’s face fell instantly. “You know, if you were a poor sister who’d been raped, or had an incident with a non-paying customer, I’d put myself on the line to stand up for you. But you’re out there still doing business when you’ve already got a man who can take care of your every need. I don’t have time to be taking care of whores,” she spat. “Come talk to me again when you’ve cleaned up your act.”

Lindsay glared at her, her eyes fiery with wrath.

“Oh, is that so? Fine. I won’t ask you for favours anymore. I know you’re still

sore about losing Galen to me. Aren't you ashamed of holding such a petty jealous grudge against me?"

Tonya appeared unfazed, but the other sisters were quicker to rise to anger.

"You shut your mouth, pussy!"

"You think Tonya's still attached to a piece of shit like Galen?"

It was as if someone had prodded a hornet's nest. Lindsay seemed overwhelmed by the storm of insults, and angrily turned on her heel and walked out. Even after she left, the sisters' wrath showed no signs of settling.

"Ugh, the nerve of her! The bitch gets under my skin! Tonya took such good care of her, and this is how she repays her."

"I hope Galen finds out she's been whoring so he can kill the brat and be done with her!"

Yuto observed the sisters venting out of the corner of his eye as he nonchalantly started a conversation with Tonya.

"Galen's the leader of ABL, right? What kind of guy is he?"

Tonya shrugged and ground out her cigarette. "Sentenced to life with no parole. He murdered three black men. He's certainly got the smarts to be the boss of an organization, but he makes a dangerous boyfriend. He'll murder someone and laugh while he's doing it — he's vicious. He's nice and sweet on the outside, which is why Lindsay probably underestimates him. But she'll come to regret that soon."

A brutal man who wielded the leadership skills to head an organization — the glimpse of Galen's face which Yuto had gotten in the rec room last night overlapped with his impression of a ruthless Corvus. If he were alone with Tonya, Yuto would have liked to cut to the chase and ask her if Galen had a burn scar on his back. Although it wasn't in his records, it was possible that he had gotten a burn after getting into prison.

The tea party wrapped up sometime later. The sisters all flocked to Dick and Yuto for kisses and handshakes before they reluctantly left Tonya's cell. Every sister gave Dick a somewhat bashful smile. Dick patiently played the perfect

prince for the ladies, maintaining a smile and gentlemanly manner as he dealt with each and every one of them. It was an unusual sight considering how brusque he usually was.

“Nice to the sisters, aren’t you?” Yuto said, his voice slightly tinged with criticism. Dick instantly wiped the smile off his face and looked at Yuto with the usual cold, expressionless eyes.

“It’s a man’s job to be kind to a lady.”

“Like you’ve got any right to say that.”

“Dick knows the kind of pain the girls go through,” Tonya said. “No matter how well you go about your business, selling yourself comes with its share of violence. That usually means frequent visits to the infirmary.”

Yuto could not help but feel a mixture of regret and pity at Tonya’s words. Although the sisters acted cheerful and carefree, behind the scenes they experienced staggering hardships that came with living a life in the shadows.

“Thank you for coming today, Dick,” Tonya said, kissing him on the cheek.

“I enjoyed myself, too,” said Dick, returning her kiss. Tonya gave Yuto the same farewell before letting a humorous smile grace her features.

“What?” Yuto asked. “Is there something on my face?”

“No, quite the opposite,” said Tonya. “You actually look pretty cute without your beard. How old are you, really? Around twenty-five?”

“Give me a break, Tonya. I’m twenty-eight.”

“Oh, really? You’re only a year away from Dick, then,” Tonya said, looking back and forth between the two. Then, she showed a smile even more enthralling than before. “You’re different types of handsome, but you’re both just as attractive. Seeing you stand together like that makes me almost forget that I’m in this dreary hellhole.”

“Falling hard for Tonya, Lennix?” Dick murmured in a teasing voice as soon as they left Tonya’s cell. Yuto was weary at having the joke rehashed again, but also a little glad that Dick was beginning to warm up towards him. So, instead of

showing his displeasure, he decided to wear a purposely indifferent expression.

“I’d say you’re the one falling for her. That’s why you keep teasing me about it.”

“I agree, Tonya’s pretty attractive, but unfortunately I’m not interested in ladies.”

Yuto was at a loss of how to interpret those words. He furrowed his brow as he looked at Dick.

“Do you mean that as in, you’re not interested in fake women?”

“No. I mean exactly what I said. I’m gay.”

Yuto was more exasperated than surprised at how casually Dick had just come out to him. “Did you really want to say something that important in a place like this?” He couldn’t believe that Dick had the guts to divulge his sexuality mid-walk, in a hallway filled with inmates walking back and forth. These issues were supposed to be extremely delicate. Yuto had always believed they had to be handled as carefully as a live bomb.

“The fact doesn’t change, no matter where I say it.”

“It does matter. What if someone were to overhear?”

Rape was rampant in prison. It wasn’t uncommon for inmates to enter romantic relationships for protection. But once a man was known as gay, he was often seen with a critical eye. Although hardly logical, homosexual relations in prison were only accepted because they were seen as substitutes in the absence of women. Sex was the same. Although inmates were accepting of the sisters, a normal-looking homosexual man was shunned almost to an abnormal degree, and was often called “homo” or “fag” behind his back.

“I didn’t think you were the type to blabber about yourself,” Yuto criticized.

“Stop being absurd, Lennix. I was only being honest.”

“And I’m telling you you should be more careful,” Yuto said angrily.

“You’re an odd one,” Dick replied with a shrug. “Normally you’d expect someone to be shocked or creeped out if he found out his cellmate was gay. I didn’t think I’d get a scolding for being too chatty. Didn’t see that coming.”

Yuto felt his temper rise even more as he fixed Dick with a glare. “Stop shitting with me. I don’t discriminate toward minorities and I don’t hold any prejudices against people’s sexualities. That’s not how I work. But if you ever try to come after my ass, I’ve got my own ideas on what to do with you.”

“Oh? And what are you going to do?” Dick said, looking like he was thoroughly enjoying himself. Yuto pointed his index finger squarely at Dick’s nose.

“I’ll break your cock in half so you’ll never be able to use it again.”

Although Yuto had meant to sound intimidating, he had gone a little overboard with his forcefulness. Much to Yuto’s dismay, Dick responded by snorting and bursting into laughter which was hard enough to make his shoulders shake.

“What’s so funny?” Yuto snapped.

“I mean, look at you, you just—”

Yuto’s pride was shredded to ribbons from being subjected to such laughter from a man who rarely even smiled. He left Dick to his own made to storm off, but was grabbed by the arm from behind.

“Hey, don’t be so mad about it, Lennix,” Dick said.

“You never stop making fun of me, do you, you bastard? The pretty face doesn’t give you a free pass to do whatever the hell you want.”

“I know it doesn’t. And I don’t always make fun of you.”

“Liar,” Yuto retorted. “On my first day here you made some joke and said you’d protect me if I agreed to be your bitch. And don’t say you don’t remember,” he said accusingly.

“I was half-serious about that, actually,” Dick said with a straight face.

“—What?”

“I thought I’d be nice and make a sacrifice for my poor fellow roommate who was being preyed on by BB. No one would make a move on you if we pretended you were my girl.”

“You’re horrible, you know that? Did you think I’d appreciate being picked up out of pity?”

“What, you’d rather I pick you up because I was serious about it?” Dick said without missing a beat. Yuto felt like throwing his hands up in frustration. Dick had a comeback for everything he said. This man of few words was apparently a smooth talker once he was in the mood to argue.

“Well, I figured you’d say no, anyway,” Dick said. “But now you’ve learned the hard way how important it is not to let your guard down in this place, right?”

“Oh, you bet,” Yuto said sarcastically. “Thank goodness I share a cell with a wonderful guy like you to teach me.”

“No need to be such a sour puss.”

“You can thank yourself for that.”

Perhaps Dick was not as bad as he thought. But he certainly wasn’t a good guy, either.

“Hey, I know I’m not exactly the ideal companion,” Dick said, “but that’s just how I am.”

“Oh, good, you know you have a problem. Work on fixing it. Oh, and Dick, don’t even think of making eyes at me. Ever.”

“I won’t. You’re not my type, anyway. It’d be lot more fun trying to pick up a kid like Matthew.”

Yuto wasn’t sure whether to be glad or offended. He maintained an unimpressed expression as he tossed a glance at Dick.

“What?” said Dick innocently. “You don’t believe me? I’ll swear to God if you want me to.”

“You’re Christian?”

“No, I’m atheist.”

“You bastard.”

Dick was a funny guy once he opened up. But much of him was still shrouded in mystery, and it was hard to grasp what kind of person he really was. Yuto wondered if he would understand Dick better someday, when they were close enough to be completely honest with each other.

Some deeply-rooted force seemed to make Dick turn people away and maintain a distance with them. Yuto could see the same trait in every inmate in varying degrees, but in Dick's case it was different. He didn't put up walls with an obvious pessimistic attitude, nor did he obstinately refuse to interact with others in the uniquely stubborn way that inmates did. Although Dick was willing to let in those who approached, he also seemed to take a subtle step back each time, making the distance feel unchanged.

Yuto's handsome, cold-eyed cellmate was a man filled with mysteries. He lingered in Yuto's mind and was a bothersome existence. Like Corvus, but for entirely different reasons.

To be continued